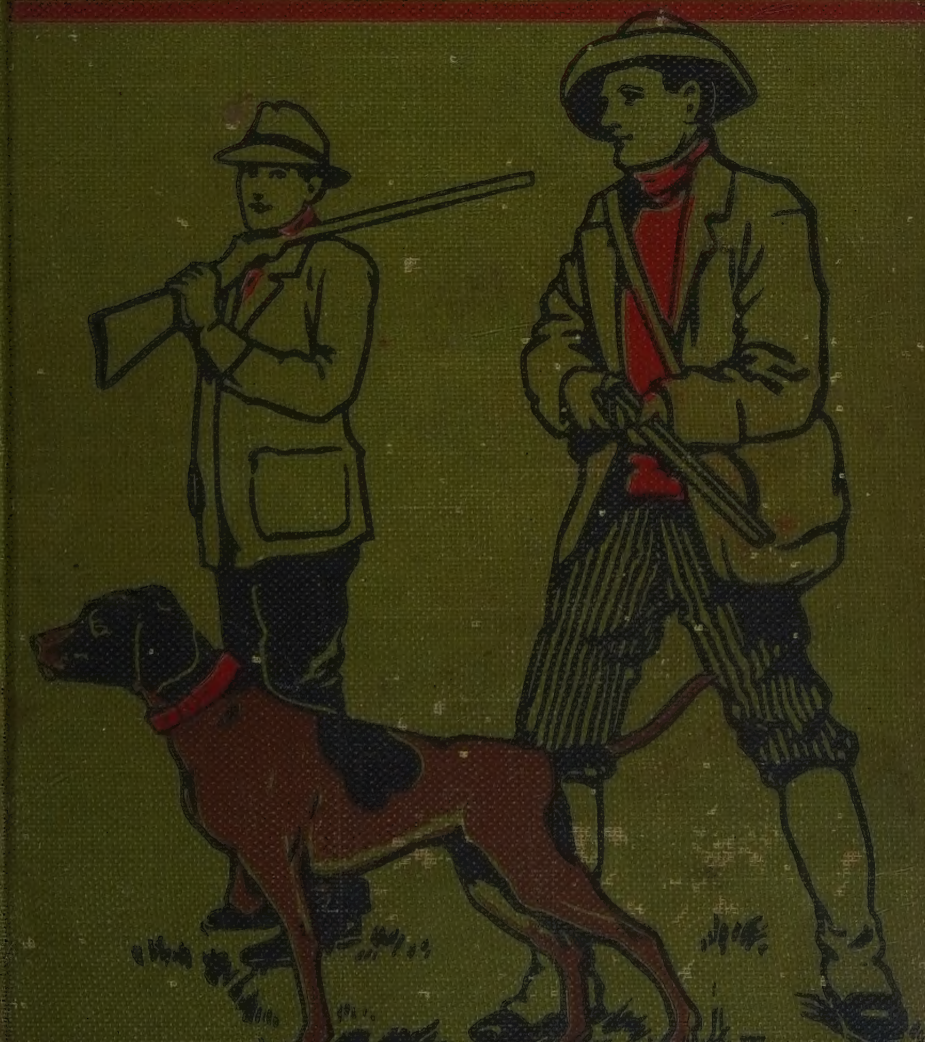
The Great Oakdale Mystery



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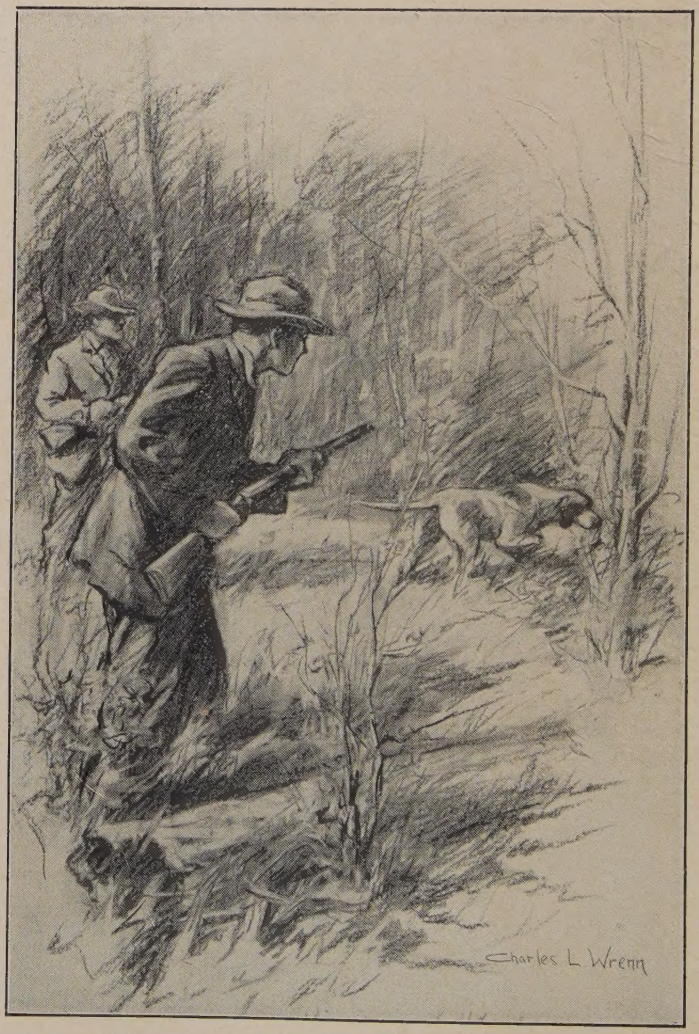

"POINT, ROY — POINT!" CALLED SAGE, SOFTLY.
—Page 11.

THE GREAT OAKDALE MYSTERY

By MORGAN SCOTT

Author of

"Ben Stone at Oakdale," "Boys of Oakdale Academy," "Rival Pitchers of Oakdale," "Oakdale Boys in Camp," "The New Boys at Oakdale," etc.

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The Great Oakdale Mystery.

CHAPTER I.

THE HUNTERS.

Two boys, each carrying a gun, came out of a strip of woods and paused. They were followed by a short-haired pointer dog. One of the boys, whose gun was a single-barreled repeater, bore a game-bag suspended from his shoulder by a strap, and he spoke to the dog with an air of authority that proclaimed him the animal's master. He was a pleasant-faced, blue-eyed chap, and his name was Fred Sage.

The gun of the other boy was a double-barreled hammerless. The boy had a slightly undershot jaw, and his eyes were a trifle too small. This was Roy Hooker. During the months of the past summer these two fellows had become exceedingly friendly.

"There are the Hopkins woodcock covers down yonder, Fred," said Roy, pointing across the open strip of pasture land. "Old Hopkins doesn't like to have anyone gun there, but I'm for giving those covers a try, as long as he will probably never know it."

"Has he posted 'No Trespass' signs?" asked Sage.

"Guess not; I haven't seen any. He doesn't do any shooting himself, but being a cranky old bear, he doesn't like to have anyone else gun on his property."

"Well, as long as there are no warnings posted and he hasn't personally notified us to keep off, we'll see if we can find any birds there. The covers look attractive to me. Here, Spot; heel, sir."

With the first indication that the boys intended to proceed, the eager dog had started forward, but he turned at the command of his master and once more fell in behind.

The forenoon of this clear, sunny autumn day was not far advanced, the young hunters having

set forth shortly after breakfast. Although the air was clear and almost warm, there was a certain suggestion of crispness in it, which, together with the flaming leaves of the deciduous trees, plainly betokened that the early autumn frosts had been at work. The stubble of the open pasture land was brown and dry. Behind the boys, in the woods they had just left, squirrels were chattering and bluejays screaming, but Fred and Roy were after bigger and more legitimate game. Thus far their hunt had proved disappointing.

"If we don't find anything down yonder," said Hooker, "I'll get mad and shoot the next squirrel that barks at me. I was tempted to pop over one big gray fellow that leered at me from a limb."

"You don't eat squirrels, do you?"

"Oh, no."

"What would you do with them if you should shoot 'em?"

"Nothing; just throw them away."

"Then don't shoot them, Roy. It's not good sport to kill practically harmless creatures simply

for the sake of killing something. I'd rather never shoot anything at all than do that."

"Oh, you're deucedly finicky about some things, old fellow. You won't have many chances to gun this fall, for football is going to keep you busy. When I proposed it last night I hardly thought I'd get you out to-day."

"And I came out with the understanding that we are to get back in time for practice this afternoon. Next Saturday, a week from to-day, the team plays its first game."

"And will be beautifully beaten," prophesied Hooker.

"What makes you think so?"

"Why shouldn't I think so? The eleven is going to be weak this year. With Roger Eliot for captain, it made an unexpected success last fall; but Eliot is gone, and Stone, who was chosen to follow him as captain, never can be such a crafty, far-sighted general. The team was weakened fifty per cent by the loss of Eliot."

"Perhaps you're right," admitted Sage; "but you seem to forget that we ought to receive some

strength from the development of new players. For instance, there's that fellow from Texas, Rodney Grant——"

"Oh, yes," nodded Roy quickly, "I suppose he'll help some, but it takes time to make a football player, and Grant has had little experience at the game. Stone realizes he's going to be shy of material, and he's coaxing everybody to come out for practice. He's been at me."

"You're going to come out, aren't you?"

"I don't know. Never did care a great deal about football. You know it's my ambition to be a baseball pitcher, and a fellow can't do everything."

"Baseball is over now, and there'll be no more until next spring. For the good of the team you ought to take hold and do your best to become a player and fill one of the weak spots."

"And maybe get a broken leg or arm or collarbone to set me back. A baseball player is taking chances when he goes in for football."

"But if none of our ball players went in for football," reminded Sage, "we'd have no eleven.

Our school isn't big enough for the two teams to be made up of distinct and independent bodies of players. You're quick, active and strong, Roy, and, if you choose to take hold and work hard, it seems to me you might become one of the valuable members of the eleven."

"Oh, possibly," admitted Hooker, attempting to conceal the fact that he was somewhat flattered. "I fancy I could do as well as some other fellows, Piper, Cooper or Tuttle, for instance. In a way they are mere makeshifts; none of them is a bang-up good football man."

By this time they had crossed the pasture land and reached the edge of the covers, the dog betraying a restless desire to get to work. Sage permitted the animal to go forward, directing his movements now and then by a word of command, and, with the guns held ready for quick use, the young hunters advanced slowly, keeping their eyes on the pointer the most of the time. They separated somewhat and went forward with the dog at the apex of an imaginary triangle. Nearly all the time the boys could see each other through

the scrub growth, which made it unlikely that either would place his friend in danger by careless shooting.

Moving hither and thither, sniffing, pausing, advancing, every hunting instinct alert, the dog did his work beautifully. Suddenly, with one foot uplifted, tail horizontal and rigid and muzzle thrust forward, the pointer became a statue of stone. Directly ahead of him, a few feet away, was a thick cluster of low bushes.

"Point, Roy—point!" called Sage softly, his repeater held in both hands and half lifted, ready for a quick shot.

Immediately Hooker swerved toward the dog and advanced as swiftly and noiselessly as possible, in order to obtain a position for a shot when the bird should flush. Reaching a favorable spot, he placed himself in position to shoot and waited for the rise.

The seconds passed slowly—so slowly that to the anxious boys they seemed more like minutes. A chickadee flitted through the bushes, lighted on a branch within five feet of Roy, performed

some surprising horizontal bar evolutions and applauded himself in a ludicrously hoarse voice. Something rustled at a distance, like a creature running swiftly along the ground. Far away, so far that it was but faintly heard, the gun of some other hunter spoke.

With a sudden whirr of wings a woodcock rose straight up from the further side of the cluster of bushes. The butt of Sage's gun came to his shoulder, his eye caught the sights, and he fired.

Hooker was a trifle slower, but ere Sage, realizing that he had shot too quickly and therefore made a miss, could fire again, Roy's weapon spoke.

Down came the bird into the midst of the thicket.

"Good work, old man," cried Fred approvingly. "You got him. I shot under; didn't wait for him to make his full rise. Go fetch, Spot."

The dog, released from the spell that had chained him motionless, plunged forward, sniffing around in search of the bird. In a few moments

he brought the dead woodcock and placed it at his master's feet.

"A plump fellow," laughed Sage, holding the kill up for the other lad to see. "That's the first blood for you, Roy. Shall I put it in my bag?"

"Sure; I haven't any. There's likely more of them near by."

There were more, and Sage evened things up by bringing down the next one. After this both boys missed a shot, and, though they had tried to "mark" their birds when they lighted, they beat back and forth for more than half an hour without getting another flush.

"Come on," said Roy at last; "I'm tired of this. There's some good partridge timber near by, and I'd rather shoot one partridge than half a dozen woodcock."

"Every fellow to his taste," laughed Sage. "I prefer the sport of woodcock shooting, and I certainly hate to leave without getting either of those two birds up again."

He yielded, however, to Hooker's urging, and

they left the low covers for the adjacent timber, in which partridges might be found.

The partridges were there, too. Roy put one up almost beneath his feet, but the timber was so thick at that point that he could not get even a chance shot with the slightest hope of success. While he was grumbling over this, Spot made a point and the partridge rose with a booming of wings before Sage could give his companion warning.

Fred fired.

"Did you get her?" called Hooker.

"I think I hit her," was the answer. "I saw her go down. Come, Spot, we must dig that bird out."

Hooker started to follow, but had not advanced thirty feet before still another partridge rose and went sailing away in another direction. This time Roy fired, but he did so under such a disadvantage and with so much haste that he had little hope of bringing down the game.

"Confound it!" he muttered. "Are all these birds going to get away?"

For a full minute he stood still in his tracks, peering into the woods on all sides and listening keenly. Then he removed the empty shell from his gun and slipped a loaded one into place.

"I'm going to follow that old bird I banged at," he decided. "I don't believe she went beyond the road that runs through these woods. If I can get her without the assistance of the dog, it will be a trick worth turning."

Having hurried after the partridge until he fancied he had reached a point where the bird might have alighted, he began creeping forward with the utmost caution, pausing every few yards to listen and use his eyes. Once an acorn, clipping down through the leaves and striking the ground, gave him a start, but it seemed that the partridge had flown farther than he thought, for presently, without again sighting the game, he approached the road. A short distance from the highway he stopped in his tracks and flung the gun to his shoulder, the barrel levelled toward some roadside bushes, near which he had heard a slight noise.

Beyond the bushes a man rose into view from a stone on which he had been seated, and found himself looking straight into the muzzle of Hooker's gun.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER.

Roy was tremendously startled. The gun had an easy pull, and his bent finger was gently touching the trigger, yet so astonished was he by the unexpected appearance of the man that for some moments he stood rigid with the weapon leveled at the stranger's head.

On the other hand, the man was no less dismayed. Not more than twenty-six or seven years of age, he was somewhat roughly dressed and decidedly in need of a shave. His eyes opened wide at sight of the threatening weapon, and a wave of pallor swept over his bronzed face. Not a word escaped his parted lips.

Presently, with a catch of his breath, Hooker lowered the gun.

"By Jove!" he cried, with a touch of resentment. "You came near getting shot, bobbing up that fashion from behind those bushes."

No longer menaced by the gun, the stranger seemed greatly relieved. Gradually the color returned to his face, and, his eyes searching the young hunter keenly, he gave a short, nervous laugh.

"It's pretty serious," he said, "when a chap can't sit down by the roadside to rest without being in danger of getting himself peppered from a shotgun. You should make sure of the kind of game you're banging at, before you fire."

"If I hadn't done so," returned Hooker, still feeling slightly resentful, "I'd probably blown your head off. I was following a partridge. Did you see one fly across the road a short time ago?"

"No, I didn't; but I haven't been here more than four or five minutes—perhaps not that long."

The man had a pleasant, agreeable face, and Hooker thought that, were he shaved and better dressed, he would be a rather good-looking chap. Apparently he had not wholly recovered from the start which the sight of the armed boy had

given him, for he was still a bit nervous and uneasy.

"Maybe," said Roy, "it took me longer than I thought to follow that old bird to this point. Perhaps she flew across the road before you came along."

"Are you alone?" asked the man.

"I'm with a friend. He's back in the woods somewhere with his dog."

"Of course you live near here?"

"Yes, in Oakdale."

The man seemed interested. "Oakdale; that's a small town near by, isn't it?"

"You must be a total stranger in these parts," said Roy, as he stepped out into the road. "Oakdale is not more than three or four miles from here. It's a country village." He was wondering if the man could be a tramp, but closer inspection made this seem quite improbable, despite the stranger's rough clothes and somewhat shabby appearance.

"No, I don't belong around here," said the

man. "I'm looking for work. Anything a fellow can do in Oakdale?"

"I don't know about that, but I presume one could find some sort of work if he wasn't too particular. There are two mills and some lime quarries, but the men who work in the quarries are mostly foreigners. What are your special qualifications?"

"I haven't any," was the frank confession. "I'm ready to do any sort of work to earn an honest living."

"In that case, it shouldn't be hard for you to find something."

"It's not as easy as you might think. You see, employers usually like to know something about the workmen they engage, and they are apt to be suspicious of a total stranger who looks a bit rough and down in his luck."

"Of course you're ready to tell anyone about yourself and give references?"

The young man shrugged his shoulders. "I don't happen to have any references," he an-

swered. "Of course I can answer questions about myself, but who would know I wasn't lying?"

"If you stated your last place of employment, it would be a simple matter to investigate your story."

Again that quick shrugging of the shoulders. "Yes, but supposing that, for reasons of my own, I didn't care to tell where I've been employed?"

"Reasons? What sort of reasons could you have, unless——"

"It might be the case, you know, that I had had trouble with my former employer. Perhaps," he went on hastily, "we quarreled over something for which I was not at all to blame, and that quarrel led to my leaving without giving due notice. You see, that would deprive me of references and would make it impossible for me to hope for any benefit by stating where and for whom I had worked."

"Yes, I see," nodded Hooker slowly. "That would put you in bad. In such a case, unless someone was in great need of a man, I doubt if you could find employment."

The stranger made a quick gesture with one hand.

"There you are," he said; "or rather, there I am. Until you get up against it yourself, you'll not be able to understand such a predicament, and I hope you'll never have the misfortune to face such a situation."

Now Hooker had been led to believe that the misfortunes which usually befall a person, barring ill health, were almost always the result of incompetence, carelessness or dishonesty, and the fact that this stranger was wholly indisposed to make known his past history led the boy to regard him with doubt and suspicion. Perhaps the man understood something of what was passing in Roy's mind, for suddenly he said:

"You can see how it is; even you would hesitate about giving me work. That's the way with everybody. They demand to know a person's past; they want to pry into his private affairs. But I tell you," he added, a trifle bitterly, "I feel that it's none of their business, and I resent their impertinence. The man who gives me a job

at which I can earn an honest living will find me ready to do my work, and do it well. Why should he insist on probing private matters concerning me, any more than I should demand to know about his personal history? In fact, in many cases it would be to the advantage of the laborer if his employer were compelled to lay bare such secrets. A great many would be shown up as grinders of the poor, bloodsuckers living and growing fat upon the life-toll of others, unfeeling despots paying their workmen a mere pittance while they piled up riches by what those workmen produced. And some would be branded as dishonest rascals from whom their neighbors would shrink in abhorrence."

"Jingoes!" exclaimed Hooker, fancying himself enlightened by the vehement words of the stranger. "I guess I know what's the matter with you. You must be a Socialist."

The man laughed. "That's the usual term applied in these days to those who have courage enough to question the honesty and fair dealing of a certain greedy, selfish brand of employ-

ers. But I'm not claiming that all employers are of that sort. If they were, conditions in this country would be desperate indeed. But what's the use in talking to you of such things; you're simply a boy, and at your age problems of that nature had never troubled me for a moment. At your age," he continued, something like a dreamy look of sadness creeping into his blue eyes, "I was as carefree and thoughtless as you are to-day. I'd give a great deal if it were possible for me to go back to that time."

This statement served to convince Hooker that the stranger was carrying a secret locked in his heart, and that the secret was one which gave him no small amount of regret and remorse. Otherwise, why should a man in the very prime of his youth and vigor, a time to which Roy looked forward with eager anticipation, desire to blot out a portion of his life that he might return to the days of his boyhood?

The sad and dreamy look was gone in a moment, and the stranger asked:

"Have you lived long in Oakdale?"

"Brought up there," answered Hooker.

"Then I presume you know nearly everyone in town?"

"Sure. In a little place like that everybody knows everybody else."

The man's next question gave the lad a start:

"Do you know any people by the name of Sage?"

"What? Sage? I should say so!"

"Ah!" breathed the man. "There is a family by that name in Oakdale?"

"Yes."

"How long have they been there?"

"Let me see. About three years, I think."

"Where did they come from? Do you know?"

"Not exactly, though I believe they came from somewhere in New York State. Why, Fred Sage is my chum."

"Oh, is he?" The stranger's eyes were now bright with interest and his manner eager.

"You bet he is," nodded Roy. "He's a fine chap, too. We're gunning together to-day. He's the fellow I spoke of. I left him back yonder

with his dog. Do you know the Sages? If you do, perhaps they might give you a recommendation that would help you get work."

At this moment the report of a gun, only a short distance away, rang through the woods.

"That's Fred—that's him now," cried Hooker. "I'll bet he bagged that old biddy." Then he lifted his voice and shouted: "Hey, Fred! Here I am, out in the road. Did you get anything?"

"I didn't miss that time," came back the triumphant answer. "It's a partridge."

"The one I was after, I reckon," said Roy, with a touch of chagrin. "She must have run on the ground so that I lost track of her. Here comes Fred now."

There was a sound of someone pushing through the underbrush, and Roy, facing the woods, waited for his chum to appear. In a few moments, followed by the dog, Sage came out of the woods, triumphantly holding aloft a dead partridge.

"The other one fooled me and I lost her," he

said; "but I got a good open chance at this old biddy. She didn't get away."

"She got away from me," said Roy. "I'm sure that's the one I chased, but she gave me the slip all right. I was so hot after her that I came near shooting——"

He stopped abruptly, his mouth open as he looked around for the mysterious stranger. To his astonishment, the man had disappeared.

CHAPTER III.

THE HOME OF THE SAGES.

"Well, what do you know about that?" muttered Hooker wonderingly. "He's gone."

"Who?" questioned Fred, reaching the road.

"The man—the man I was talking with. He was sitting right here on this stone when I came sneaking down through the woods, and I almost shot his head off. He rose up into view just in time. Where the dickens has he gone?"

In both directions a strip of road lay in plain view, but, save themselves, there was no human being to be seen upon it.

"When did he go?" questioned Sage.

"After you fired; while I was watching for you to come out of the woods. He was right here within five feet of me. I can't understand how he got away so quickly without my knowing it. He must have put off into the woods on the other side."

"What made him do that?"

"You've got me. He was a stranger around these parts, and said he was looking for work. There was something queer about him, too. He was a good, healthy looking specimen, and he didn't seem like a hobo, though his clothes were rather rough. He talked like an educated man. Say, Fred, he asked about you."

"About *me?*" exclaimed Sage in surprise. "Why, how was that?"

"Don't know. He asked if there was a family by the name of Sage in Oakdale and how long they had been there. He must be someone who knows you, Fred."

"Describe him."

Roy did so as well as he was able, but his friend did not seem at all enlightened.

"I can't imagine who he was," said Fred. "The description doesn't seem to fit anyone I know. Did he give his name?"

"No; I forgot to ask it. He talked like a Socialist or an Anarchist, although he didn't look to be a very desperate character. And he seemed

nervous and troubled about something or other, but perhaps that was because he fancied he had come so near getting himself shot. When he saw me, with the gun leveled straight at him, he turned pale."

"I don't wonder," said Fred, with a laugh. "It was enough to give anyone a start. I don't see what made him run away, and I wish he'd waited until I could have taken a look at him."

"Perhaps he was somebody who knew you before you came to Oakdale."

Sage frowned a bit. "It doesn't seem likely, and yet, of course, it may be so. Well, we can't fret ourselves about him. Let's go on with the hunt. Spot is getting restless."

For some time the pointer had been running back and forth in the road, turning at intervals to gaze inquiringly at his master and whine beseechingly. Apparently the dog was wondering why the boys should linger there, with the woods all about them and their success thus far giving ample evidence that there was plenty of game to be had for the hunting.

Absorbed once more in the search for birds, both lads seemingly dismissed all thoughts of the stranger and his puzzling behavior; but, had he possessed the faculty of reading his companion's mind, Hooker would have been surprised to discover that, far from dismissing such thoughts, Sage was not a little troubled by them. Indeed, so deeply plunged was he in mental speculations that he failed to note when the dog next made a point, and he flushed the bird unexpectedly by the careless manner in which he stumbled forward through the underbrush. Taken thus unawares, he could not recover his self-possession in time to shoot, and, Hooker being in no position to fire, the game got away untouched, not a little to the disgust of Spot.

"What's the matter with you, Fred?" called Roy sharply. "You almost stepped on that one. Didn't you see Spot point?"

"No," was the regretful confession, "I didn't notice it."

"I started to call to you, but I thought you

knew your business and were ready to pepper away when the bird flushed."

Later, when they ran into a covey of woodcock, Fred was astonishingly slow about shooting, and Hooker brought down two birds to his one, which seemed rather remarkable, as Sage was much the better wing shot. It was Fred, too, who, seeming the first to tire of the sport, finally proposed that they should go home.

"There's time enough," objected Roy. "Practice doesn't begin until three o'clock, and it's not yet noon."

"But I'll need to rest up a bit after this tramp. I've got enough, anyhow."

On the way back to the village Sage suddenly asked Hooker once more to describe the stranger, and when Roy had complied he again asserted that he had not the least idea as to the man's identity.

It was nearly one o'clock when Sage reached his home, a comfortable, well-kept story-and-a-half house on the outskirts of the village, but he found that his mother had kept dinner waiting

for him, for which he scolded her in a laughing fashion.

"No need to put yourself to so much trouble, mother," he said. "I could have done just as well with a cold lunch from the pantry."

"It was no trouble, my boy," she replied, affection in her tone and in the glance she gave him. "We knew you would be home, for you said there was to be football practice this afternoon, and it was your father who suggested that we should wait for you."

She was not an old woman, but her hair was snowy white, and there was something in her face and the depths of her gentle eyes which indicated that her life had not been wholly free from care and sorrow.

Fred's father, who had been reading in the sitting room, put aside his newspaper and came into the dining-room, rubbing his hands together as he peered at the boy over the gold-bowed spectacles that clung to his nose.

"Well, what luck, young man?" he asked. "Did you find any shooting worth while?"

"We got seven woodcock and three partridges," answered Fred; "but Roy shot the most of them, though he insisted on dividing them. I made him take the odd partridge, though, keeping only one for mother, as she doesn't care for woodcock."

"H'm!" nodded Andrew Sage slowly. "How did you happen to let him outshoot you, Fred? With that new gun of yours, I thought you'd make a record. Doesn't it shoot as well as you expected?"

"Oh, the gun is all right. I suppose I was a bit off form."

He was on the point of telling them of the unknown man who had questioned Hooker about the Sages living in Oakdale and then run away in such a perplexing manner on Fred's approach, but something seemed to caution him to remain silent, and he did so.

Like Roy Hooker, the people of Oakdale knew little about the Sages, save that they had lived in the place for three years having moved there from some distant state. Andrew Sage was a

man nearly sixty years of age, with the speech and bearing of a person of education and refinement. He had purchased a tiny farm of some twenty acres, the buildings of which were promptly repaired, remodelled within and thoroughly painted. The grounds in the vicinity of the buildings were cleared and graded, with the exception of a picket-fenced front yard, where an old-fashioned flower garden had been choked out by weeds. Of course the fence was straightened up, repaired and given several coats of paint, and the flower garden was restored to its former state of blooming fragrance and beauty; but this work was done at the direction of Mrs. Sage, who seemed to find in that garden something to occupy her mind and give her many hours of pleasure. Her knowledge of flowers and their proper care was much superior to the knowledge displayed by her husband in the vegetable garden, which he planted and attended. The neighbors often remarked that it was plain enough that Andrew Sage had never turned his hand to such labor before coming to Oakdale.

That the Sages possessed an income sufficient to support them modestly was likewise evident, for they lived comfortably and paid their bills promptly, although Mr. Sage worked upon his own property only, and, as conducted, that brought in practically no revenue whatever.

The little household was held together by strong bands of understanding and affection which would have been apparent enough to anyone who could have watched them this day at their belated dinner. Into their pleasant conversation there entered no jarring note, and their thoughtfulness and consideration for one another was of the finest sort. The atmosphere of that home was truly such as it should be, comfortable, homelike, fraught with an indescribable something that always makes such a place the best-loved spot on earth.

It was natural that Fred's mother should speak of football and its dangers and express her regret that he should care to take part in such sport. And in supporting Fred's arguments in favor of the game, it was diplomatic of his father

to seem, in a way, to favor both sides of the question, while all the time he was cleverly reassuring the apprehensive woman. Andrew Sage's skill in this form of controversy not only made it much easier for Fred, but checked, in a great measure, the worriment of the boy's mother.

When he reached the football field that afternoon Fred found Roy Hooker telling a group of boys about the encounter with the mysterious stranger. Of those boys Billy Piper, familiarly known as "Sleuth" on account of his yearning desire to emulate the feats of detective heroes of fiction, appeared to be the most deeply interested. The others showed a disposition to treat the affair as something of minor importance or no importance whatever.

"Through what I can gather from your statements, Hooker," said Sleuth, "I am led to infer that this unknown party may have been a red-handed criminal fleeing from justice. Or, perchance, to look at the matter in another light, he was a person deeply wronged, seeking to visit

retribution on the head of one who had injured him. I say, Sage," he called, catching sight of Fred, "have you any reason to suppose that you or any of your immediate relatives may have a bitter and remorseless enemy who seeks reprisal for some fancied injury in the dark and buried years of the past?"

"As far as I know," answered Fred, "we have not an enemy in the world."

"And you haven't a notion as to the identity of the mysterious stranger who made inquiries about you and then ran away before you could get a look at him?"

"Not the remotest idea."

"Hah!" breathed Piper in deep satisfaction. "The plot thickens. I scent a mystery of deep and terrible significance. The clues are faint indeed, but they shall not baffle me. If this unknown stranger lingers in the vicinity of Oakdale, I'll yet lay bare his foul designs and foil him in his fell purpose."

"Oh, slush!" cried Phil Springer. "You've got another bad attack, Pipe. You bub-better forget

it. Here comes Stoney. Let's start practice, fellows."

The group dissolved, leaving Piper, his arms folded, his eyes fixed upon the ground, in profound meditation.

CHAPTER IV.

A MAN "WANTED."

Captain Stone, who seemed to be amazingly conversant with the new football rules, which of late he had studied faithfully during all his spare moments, tried hard to impart an understanding of them to the other boys, the most of whom were eager to learn, their willingness keeping them at practice until the gathering darkness finally forced them to stop.

Upon the occasion of his son leaving Oakdale Academy for the purpose of taking a final college preparatory year in one of the leading prep schools of the country, Urian Eliot had contributed five hundred dollars for the purpose of carrying out a plan for certain improvements of the Oakdale gymnasium. These improvements had been made, and now in one end of the former bowling alley there were heated dressing

rooms and a number of shower baths. This made it possible for the boys to take their showers after practice or games, and then rub down and dress in comfort.

Hurrying to the gym, Fred Sage lost no time in stripping off his soiled and sweaty football clothes and making a dive for one of the shower compartments. The rooms resounded with the voices of the boys, and from some of the showers rose whoops and boos and strange gasps mingling with the hissing rush and drip of water.

"Hey, there, Cooper!" called a voice. "What are you doing? Turn on the cold. You'll parboil yourself in a minute. Look, fellers—look a' the steam coming out of Chipper's cell!"

"Aw, go on and mind your business," came from the steaming compartment. "I always start with it warm and turn off the hot gradually till it's cold enough to suit me."

"And that's abaout cold enough to bile aigs," chuckled Sile Crane, a lanky country boy who talked through his nose. "Hurry up there, Chipper, and give a feller a chance. Tuttle's treatin'

on peanuts, and you won't git none if you don't git a move on."

"Somebody can have my place," said Sage, as he shot out of the compartment, dripping icy water from every part of his shining body. "Where's my towel? I left it right here. Somebody has swiped my towel."

In a moment he had found the towel and was using it vigorously. A thorough scrubbing set his firm flesh aglow, and he jumped into his clothes feeling as fresh and vigorous as if he had not tramped the forenoon through, carrying a gun, and followed that up by an afternoon of strenuous football practice. He was almost fully dressed when he observed Sleuth Piper, still adorned in football togs, standing a short distance away and regarding him through half closed lids. In some story Sleuth had read that whenever he wished to concentrate his mind on any perplexing problem the hero of the yarn always gazed fixedly at some object through partly closed eyelids.

"Hi, there, Pipe!" called Fred sharply. "Going

to sleep? Wake up. Going to wear those rags the rest of the evening?"

"Hush!" said Piper, frowning and lifting a reproving hand. "Don't interrupt me that way when my mind is at work upon a problem."

"Forget it," advised Fred. "You'll be late for supper. Cæsar's ghost! but *I'm* as hungry as a bear."

He was the first one to leave the gymnasium, and he strode away whistling. In a few moments, however, he ceased to whistle and proceeded with his head slightly bent and his hands sunk deep in his pockets. Finally, with a shake of his shoulders, he tossed back his head, muttering:

"Confound Sleuth, anyhow! He's always trying to make a deep, dark mystery out of any unusual occurrence. It was *queer* that the man should ask about the Sages and then run away when he knew I was coming, but it isn't likely he'll ever be seen again by anyone around here, so what's the use for me to addle my brains over it?"

Truly, Fred seemed "hungry as a bear," and the manner in which he swept the food from the supper table made his mother gasp and caused his father to chuckle.

"One thing about football," said Mr. Sage, "boys who play the game aren't apt to be finicky about their food. How did you get along at the field this afternoon, son?"

"First rate, everything considered. Of course the new rules are going to bother us a little, but Stone seems wise to them, and I fancy he'll be able to do pretty well with the team, though of course we're going to miss Eliot."

"A fine boy, Roger Eliot," nodded Andrew Sage.

"Sure thing," agreed Fred instantly; "and his father comes pretty near being the real thing, too. When we first came to Oakdale people were saying that Urian Eliot was cold and close-fisted, but look what he did for the school. We've got a new gym now, heated and lighted and fitted out with shower baths, like a first-

class place. I tell you, the fellows take off their hats to Mr. Eliot these days."

"Oakdale people are just beginning to realize that Eliot has done a great deal for the town," said Mr. Sage. "He's one of our solid, reliable citizens. Only for him, we'd still be without a bank."

After supper Andrew Sage lighted his pipe, and Fred, feeling no desire to go out, settled down to a book before the comfortable open fire in the sitting room.

An hour had not passed when there came a ring at the door-bell, and Fred himself rose at once to answer. On the steps stood a dark figure with coat collar upturned and cap pulled well down. Blinded a little by the sudden change from light to darkness, the boy failed to recognize the caller.

"Good evening," he said.

"'St!" came back a sibilant hiss. "It's me, Piper. Why don't you ask a feller in? Almost cold enough to freeze to-night."

"Oh, come in, Sleuth," was the invitation, and

the visitor lost no time in stepping out of the chilly wind that swept round the corner of the house.

"What brings you up here at this hour?" questioned Fred.

"Hush! I'm doing my duty. I'm gathering up the scattered threads one by one. The skein shall be untangled."

Piper was known to Mr. and Mrs. Sage, who spoke to him pleasantly, although both were somewhat surprised by this, his first, visit to their home. Having removed his cap and jammed it into the side pocket of his coat, Sleuth deported himself in his usual mysterious manner when "investigating," and suddenly the other boy began to fear that he would speak of the stranger in the presence of the older people.

"I'm glad you dropped around, Pipe," said Fred. "I suppose you want to talk football? Come on up to my room; we can chin there as much as we like."

The caller was more than willing, and they mounted the stairs to Fred's room, which was

large, comfortable and exceedingly well furnished. But Piper, still bearing himself "professionally," gave little heed to the aspect of the room.

"I've come," he announced, declining to sit down, "to propound a few vital questions, which I trust you may see fit to answer without evasion or subterfuge."

"What's this?" laughed Sage. "Is it a court of inquiry?"

"Not exactly. Of course there is no compulsion in the matter, but, assuming that you have nothing to conceal, there should be no reason for refusing the information I require."

"Oh, say, Sleuth, don't you ever get tired of it? It must be wearisome, searching for these deep, dark mysteries in a quiet, uneventful country town like Oakdale. Of course I know what you're driving at, and in this case I think you're trying to make something out of nothing —and that's impossible."

Piper shook his head. With his hands locked behind his back, he slowly paced the floor.

"You are like the usual order of persons who lack the analytical mind," he retorted. "You fail to see the true significance of apparently commonplace events. I am different. At this moment I feel assured that we are face to face with one of the most perplexing mysteries on record. I've interviewed Hooker this evening, and from him I obtained a certain amount of information concerning the mysterious man he encountered in the woods beyond Culver's Bridge. According to his statement, that man was about twenty-six years of age, and apparently something like five feet and ten inches in height. Hooker judged that this person should weigh in the neighborhood of one hundred and sixty pounds. His complexion was medium, and he had hair slightly curly. His eyes were blue, his teeth white and even, and his smile pleasant. His voice was agreeable, but he showed traces of nervousness and anxiety. He spoke with some bitterness of people who had wealth and employed laborers. Roy states that, as far as he

could see, the man bore no peculiarly distinguishing mark, like a scar or deformity."

"Well," said Fred, lounging on the Morris chair, "why should the appearance of such a stranger interest you so deeply?"

"Wait," said Piper, halting in front of Sage's chair. "This man made inquiries concerning your family. He must have known you."

"We've lived in Oakdale only three years. There are people outside of this place who know us."

"Quite true; but when he learned that you were near at hand, and when he heard you approaching, the man disappeared in a most astounding, inexplicable and unaccountable manner. He didn't wait until you should come forth to meet him face to face."

"That was rather odd," admitted Sage.

"And, furthermore, you have stated that you have no idea who the person can be."

"Not the slightest."

"Is there anything connected with your past

or that of your parents which, for good and sufficient reasons, you wish to conceal?"

Fred sat up suddenly. "Why should you imagine anything of that sort?" he retorted sharply. "Of course it's nonsense."

"H'm!" said Sleuth. "It's a rare family closet that doesn't contain a skeleton."

"Well, Piper, if you've come here to pry into private family affairs, you may as well chase yourself at once."

"Restrain your annoyance, Sage; check your angry resentment. If you choose to unbosom yourself to me in my professional capacity, you may do so with the assurance of my honorable intention to hold inviolate any secret with which I may be entrusted."

Fred's face was flushed and he betrayed annoyance, which, however, he endeavored to restrain.

"Cut out that fol-de-rol, Piper. There's no reason why I should tell you any family secrets, if we happen to have them. As you've just said, doubtless there are few families who do not have

some minor secrets they choose to keep hidden; but, as a rule, such things concern no others than those personally interested. Again, let me repeat that you are trying to make something out of nothing, and it's extremely ridiculous."

"Perhaps so," retorted Sleuth. "But tell me, did you ever hear of a man by the name of James Wilson?"

"Never. What has he to do with the matter?"

The visitor drew a folded newspaper from an inner pocket of his coat. "It's my custom," he said, "to take special note of the records of crime and criminals as contained in the press of the day. I never overlook anything of the sort. Here in this paper is the description of one James Wilson, *alias* 'William Hunt,' *alias* 'Philip Hastings,' but known among his pals as 'Gentleman Jim.' This man is described as twenty-six years of age, five feet, ten inches in height, and weighing one hundred and sixty pounds. While there are no distinguishing marks upon his person, he has blue eyes; a medium complexion; hair slightly curly; white, even teeth; a pleasant

smile; an agreeable voice; and white, shapely hands, which show evidence of recent arduous labor. This labor was performed in prison, from which Jim Wilson has but lately been released. He is a confidence man and safe-breaker, and it seems that his prison experience has done little to cure him of his criminal proclivities, for it is suspected that since his release he has been concerned in certain unlawful operations. One week ago he was arrested in Harpersville, which is just over the state line, and placed in jail to await the arrival of officers who wanted him. But Mr. Wilson, *alias* 'William Hunt,' *alias* 'Philip Hastings,' *alias* 'Gentleman Jim,' is a slippery customer, and he didn't remain in that insecure jail. Instead of doing so, he broke out of his cell, cracked the guard's skull, and made good his escape. The guard is not expected to live, and the authorities have offered a reward of five hundred dollars for the capture of the murderous scoundrel."

"Well!" breathed Sage, who had listened with

swiftly increasing interest. "Do you think this James Wilson and the stranger Hooker talked with this forenoon are one and the same?"

"I haven't a doubt of it," declared Sleuth.

CHAPTER V.

BY THE LIGHT FROM THE WINDOW.

"But that," said Fred, "is practically a matter of supposition with you; you have no real proof."

"Proof?" returned Piper reprovingly. "Why not? The circumstances are significant, and it's only the bigoted person who denies the value of circumstantial evidence in criminal cases. The description of James Wilson applies perfectly to the mysterious stranger with whom Hooker conversed."

"If you'll think it over a bit, that description might apply to a great many persons. Wilson seems fortunate in having practically no personal characteristics by which he might readily be identified. It seems to me, Piper, that, casting aside your professed caution and acuteness, you have jumped at a conclusion. Simply be-

cause you happen to read about an ex-convict who has recently broken jail in a neighboring state, and the description of this convict, although in a way indefinite and unsatisfactory, apparently applies to a stranger in these parts, you immediately decide that the convict and the stranger are one and the same. I'm surprised at you, Sleuth."

"Wait a moment," said Piper, holding up his finger. "Let me ask you a question. Since you came to Oakdale, how often have you seen strangers in these parts who looked like tramps, talked like educated men, and deported themselves in a manner which, without the least stretch of fancy, could be called mysterious?"

"Seldom," admitted Sage.

"Never before," asserted Piper.

"And, because this happens to be the first instance of the sort, you feel confident in your hasty conclusion. I'm afraid you'll never make a great detective, Sleuth, for in stories, at least, they never jump at conclusions, and they always

make sure they're right before forming a definite opinion."

Piper was not pleased by these words. He frowned heavily and shook his head.

"You can't deny," he retorted, "that it was most strange that the man should inquire for your family and then take flight when he learned that you were about to appear before him."

"That, I admit, was odd indeed. Nevertheless, I do not think it justifies you in seeking to connect us with the ex-convict, James Wilson. It's scarcely necessary for me to tell you that we have never known such a man."

"It gives me no small amount of satisfaction," said Sleuth, "to hear that statement from your lips, even though it may, in a measure, make my work more difficult."

"Your work? What do you propose to do?"

"I hope to lay this safe-cracker by the heels. I hope to enmesh him in the toils and turn him over to the stern hand of justice."

"In which case it seems to me that your proper

course would be to notify the officers. Why don't you go to Deputy Sheriff Pickle?"

"Haw!" cried Sleuth, contemptuously snapping his fingers. "That would be the height of folly. These rural officers are blockheads in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, and William Pickle is no exception. For instance, recall the bungling mess he made of it when he arrested your friend, Benjamin Stone. Only for me, Stone might have been convicted of a crime he never committed."

"You helped get Ben out of an unpleasant predicament," admitted Sage; "but in that case Pickle did his duty, according to instructions. If you are so positive that you're not bungling in this case, you'll require the assistance of Mr. Pickle, for you can't expect to capture James Wilson unaided."

"And so you would advise me to apply to Pickle? You would advise me to tell him my deductions, through which he would be enabled, perhaps, to capture this jail-breaker and get the reward of five hundred dollars? That's what

would happen if he made the capture; he'd claim the reward, and get it. Oh, I know Bill Pickle!"

"If you gave the information on which the man was arrested, doubtless you could claim and obtain a portion of the reward money."

"Perhaps so, and perhaps not. I tell you I know Bill Pickle. He'd get it all if he could."

"But, having talked with Roy Hooker of this matter, how do you expect to keep it secret long enough to do anything yourself?"

"I didn't tell Hooker about James Wilson. I simply questioned him regarding the stranger, and learned enough to satisfy me that he and Wilson must be the same man."

"Well, how did you happen to tell *me* so much?"

Sleuth hesitated. "You see, I—I thought it might be—well, different in your case," he stumbled. "I fancied there might be reasons why you wouldn't care to say anything about it."

Sage rose to his feet. "You make me tired, Piper," he said, with a touch of angry reproof. "It's evident that you *did* think my family was

somehow connected with this criminal, whom we might be inclined to shield. Just to show you what a bungler you really are, I think I'll tell Pickle myself."

In a moment the visitor was thrown into the utmost consternation. Seizing Fred by the arm, he cried:

"Don't do that—don't! Why, if you did, and Pickle should happen to catch the man and he turned out to be the right one, you'd get part of the reward! That wouldn't be fair to me, Fred, and you know it. Give a chap a square deal, old man."

"If you're right in your suspicions, Piper, it's a bad thing to have this jail-breaker prowling around Oakdale, and it's your duty to notify the local officers."

"But supposing," protested Sleuth, "that, by some unusual chance, I should be mistaken? You can see what that would mean. I might get the wrong man arrested and make an awful mess of it. I might become the laughing stock of the vil-

lage. My professional reputation might be blasted."

"Oh, then you're not nearly as confident as you pretended to be? It seems to me like a huge joke, Piper, and if you'll take my advice, you'll stop cramming your head with foolish detective yarns and abandon the idea that you possess any special talents in the way of detecting criminals or fathoming mysteries. The last I heard about you, you were trying to write stories, and, by the way of amusement, I advise you to rely upon that occupation. Not that I imagine you'll ever write anything printable, but it might serve to keep you from the rather obnoxious habit of poking your nose into affairs which don't concern you."

Thus reproved, Sleuth found it difficult to restrain his indignation and resentment.

"You're like everybody else around here," he cried. "But you should remember the old saying that a prophet is never without honor save in his own country. Some day I'll show these people a thing or two, see if I don't. I'll make them sit

up and take notice. They may think Billy Piper's a fool, but I'll show them. Say, Sage, give me a little time on this case; don't run straight to Pickle with what I've told you. Promise me you won't do that."

In spite of himself, Fred laughed. "If I really thought there was one chance in a hundred that you had guessed right, I might insist on telling Pickle, providing you refused to do so. Not having the slightest confidence in your so-called 'deductions,' I'm willing to keep still."

"Thanks," said Piper. "Some fellows I wouldn't trust, even on their promise; but I know you, and I'm sure you'll do nothing without first consulting me. I think I'll be going."

Sage descended and bade Piper good-night at the door, watching Sleuth slouch away toward the distant lights of the village, a few of which gleamed through the darkness. Andrew Sage glanced up as the boy returned to the sitting-room.

"Well," he said, "been discussing football, son?"

"Not exactly," answered Fred. "Piper had something else on his mind."

"Isn't he a bit queer?" asked Mrs. Sage, who was employing herself with some needlework in front of the open fire.

"Most persons think he is."

"He behaves so oddly. Does he always act like that?"

"Oh, it's Piper's way. The fellows don't pay much attention to it, though they josh him sometimes."

Fred attempted again to interest himself in his book, but in spite of his efforts, his mind wandered from the story, and he repeatedly found himself thinking of Sleuth and the matter they had discussed. There was, of course, a remote possibility that Piper had not made a mistake in fancying the stranger in Oakdale was James Wilson, for whose capture a large reward had been offered; and only for his promise to remain silent Fred might have told his parents. He was inclined to regret that unconsidered pledge. Presently, his eyes drooping, he decided to go to

bed, and bade his father and mother good-night.

In his room he paced the floor, thinking it all over, his perplexity increasing.

"I can't understand why that man ran away after asking about us," he muttered. "That's what gets me. If I hadn't been afraid of giving mother uneasiness, I'd have told about it when I first came home. Piper can't be right, for certainly we don't know any convicts and jail-breakers."

As if his final words had given him a shock, he stopped in his tracks, his lips parted, his face paling somewhat, and for some moments he stood thus, without moving. Presently he resumed his walk up and down the room, his brows knitted, his manner absorbed. At last he stopped and laughed shortly as he thought of Piper pacing the floor in almost precisely that same way.

"Oh, he's a joke. I'm going to bed."

The strenuous diversions of the day had given him a healthy weariness which he was now feeling, and it did not take him long to undress. He had put out the light when he remembered that

his window was still closed, and he turned to open it.

With his hand on the sash he paused, an electric thrill shooting through his body. Directly beneath his room the light from a lower window shone forth into the darkness, falling upon the dimly seen figure of a man, who, with his hat pulled down over his eyes, was standing where he could look into the sitting-room.

For some seconds Fred remained rigid, watching the motionless man. In an instant he had become convinced that it was the stranger with whom Hooker had talked, but the baffling hat-brim prevented Fred from seeing the fellow's face.

Suddenly, as if becoming aware that someone was near who had no right to be there, the dog barked in the room below. Immediately the man drew hastily back from the border of light and retreated into the darkness.

In a twinkling Fred Sage was leaping into his clothes. The dog, quieted by a word from Mr. Sage, did not bark again. The deep darkness be-

neath a tree near the house had enfolded the man.

Fred did not strike a light. With his hastily donned clothes barely clinging to him, he caught up a pair of rubber-soled "sneakers," thrust his feet into them, opened the door of his room quickly but quietly, and crept down the stairs. He could hear his father and mother talking, but they did not hear him as he turned the key in the lock of the door and let himself out.

Quivering with excitement, the boy reached the corner of the house and peered round it. He could see no one, although the tree beneath which the man had vanished was only a short distance away.

"If I can find him, I'll demand to know what business he has around here," thought Fred. "If mother knew, she'd be badly frightened."

Summoning all his courage, he stepped out boldly and advanced toward the tree, but when he reached it there was still no living creature to be seen.

Twice Sage circled the buildings without re-

sult, and he became satisfied that the unknown had lost no time in departing.

"But it's mighty queer," he muttered—"mighty queer. I don't understand it. Perhaps I ought to tell father, but if I do I know mother won't sleep to-night."

Silently though he reëntered the house, Spot barked again, and Fred's father opened the door into the hall.

"Just stepped outdoors for a minute," said the boy. "It's going to be a good day to-morrow, I think."

"Oh, is it you?" said Mr. Sage. "Spot barked, and your mother thought he heard something. We had an idea you were abed."

"I'm going now. Good-night. Good-night, mother."

"Good-night, Fred," called his mother in response, and Mr. Sage closed the door.

For more than half an hour Fred watched from his unlighted window. He heard his parents retire, and the light no longer shone forth from the sitting-room. His eyes had become ac-

customed to the darkness and he could see certain objects in the vicinity of the house, but they were all familiar objects, and amid them no strange shadow moved.

"I'll have to tell father and mother to-morrow," decided the boy, as he finally got into bed.

Again and again during the night he dreamed of the mysterious stranger, and once he awoke panting from a terrific hand-to-hand struggle with the man. It brought him up to gaze once more from the window, through which came the chill air of the autumn night.

"I'm a fool," he whispered, his teeth chattering with the cold. "I'm going to sleep now, and see if I can't dodge those silly dreams. Confound Sleuth Piper, anyhow! Still, I'd like to know what that man was doing here."

CHAPTER VI.

CAPTAIN QUINN'S MONKEY.

Fred's parents were regular church attendants, and Fred himself rarely failed to appear with them at morning service on the Sabbath day. It must be regretfully confessed that church had little attraction for many of the youths of Oakdale, and among those who seldom sat through a sermon was Roy Hooker.

Roy, however, was waiting on the sidewalk in front of the church when Fred came out. It was a mild, sunny day, and the outside world looked most attractive. In response to a covert signal from Hooker, Sage joined him.

"Come for a walk, old man," invited Roy. "Gee! you must be dopey, sitting in that dark old church and listening to a dry sermon."

"I did get a bit sleepy," Fred confessed. "You're not going to walk far, are you?"

"Oh, you can suit yourself about that. What time do you have dinner?"

"Around two o'clock."

"That will give us a couple of hours. It's mighty pokey loafing around all day Sunday, with nothing for amusement. If you'd only go gunning——"

"Not on the Sabbath. Too many fellows do that around here."

Fred's parents had lingered to exchange a few words with some friends, and as they finally came down the walk he told them he was going for a short stroll with Roy.

"Be home to dinner, surely," urged his mother.

He promised, and set off with Hooker, turning down the street. At the square, in the center of the village, they turned on to Lake Street and proceeded eastward, passing the new bank, a small, square building of brick and stone.

"That makes a great improvement on this street," commented Fred.

"Oh, yes," nodded Hooker; "but it would have looked better had they been able to purchase that

little old hut and the land belonging to Aaron Quinn. That shanty, squatting right there almost under the rear eaves of the bank, is a regular eyesore, but I understand old Quinn refused to sell at any price."

The building in question was a tiny old house that stood some distance from the street, partly hidden by two large oak trees and a straggling growth of lilac bushes. It was sorely in need of repairs and paint, and some of the broken windows had been patched or stuffed with rags.

Aaron Quinn, the owner of this disreputable little shanty, was a surly, blustering old sea captain, who had given up his calling on account of age and rheumatism and returned to spend the latter days of his life at his birthplace in Oakdale. His irascible temper and general crabbedness made him more or less unpopular among the villagers, and especially so with the boys of the town, who seldom lost an opportunity to jibe or annoy him.

As the two friends were passing beneath the spreading limbs of one of the oaks, something

struck Roy on the shoulder and bounded to the sidewalk. It was an acorn, and Hooker might have thought that it had fallen in a natural manner from the tree had it not been followed almost immediately by another, which clipped the edge of his cap-visor.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, looking up. "Who's throwing them? Oh, I see; it's that confounded monkey."

Grinning down at the boys from one of the branches, a large monkey let fly another acorn with surprising accuracy. The creature belonged to the old sea captain, being, apparently, Quinn's only congenial companion; and, like his master, the monkey had learned to detest the village lads.

"Ah! ha! Mr. Jocko," cried Hooker, as he quickly stepped off the sidewalk and found a stone. "Two can play at that game."

"Don't," said Fred.

But before he could interfere Roy had sent the stone whistling and clipping through the branches of the tree, causing Jocko to utter a

chattering scream of mingled dismay and defiance as he quickly mounted higher.

In a moment there came a roar from the hut beyond the lilac bushes, and forth from the door, which had been standing ajar, issued Aaron Quinn with his stout cane. At one time, although rather short of stature, he had been a sturdy, husky man, who commanded the respect, if not the liking, of his sailors. Now the bushy fringe of whiskers beneath his chin seemed to bristle, his lips were drawn back from his teeth, and his eyes glared with rage.

"You young lubber!" he shouted, as he came hobbling down the path, flourishing the cane. "I'll teach ye! I'll larn ye to stone my monkey! If I ketch ye, I'll break your back!"

With a mocking shout of laughter and a taunt, Hooker took to his heels.

"Run, Fred!" he cried. "The old gink will swat you if you don't!"

But Sage did not run. Instead, he remained calmly facing the wrathy old sailor, who seemed bent on using the stout cane over the boy's head.

"Why don't you skedaddle?" snarled Captain Quinn. "Ain't you got sense enough to run?"

"I didn't do anything, and I sha'n't run," was the quiet retort. "I don't believe you'll hit me."

The man paused with the cane uplifted, surprise written on his face.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said in a milder tone. "You're about the only brat around here who hasn't tried his tricks on me. You seem to be different from the rest of these unmanly cubs. No, I won't crack ye, but if ever I get my hands on that other rascal, he'll have to take to his bed."

"Aw, you couldn't catch a snail," taunted Hooker. "Somebody will shoot that monkey of yours some day."

"If anybody hurts him, they'll sartain wish they hadn't," retorted Quinn. "He knows more than half the people in this town, and that ain't giving him a great deal of credit. Here, Jocko —here, come down."

Chattering a little, the monkey slowly swung himself down to the lower limbs and dropped to his master's shoulder, where he perched in evi-

dent assurance of security, making faces at the boys.

Fred laughed and rejoined Hooker, while, assisted by his cane, Aaron Quinn hobbled back toward the hut, carrying the monkey.

"It would be a good thing if that old pirate would get out of town," said Roy. "He's no benefit to the place."

"He's harmless enough if people will let him alone," retorted Fred; "but he's been pestered so much that he seems to have it in for everybody. At the most, it's doubtful if he lives many years, and when he dies the bank people will doubtless get his little place for what it's really worth."

They proceeded on their way, the conversation soon drifting into other channels, football for a time being the main topic, as, to Sage's surprise, Hooker betrayed considerable interest in the game.

"You're right about old Stoney," he said. "He knows the new rules. Why, he must have studied them until he has every word by heart.

Perhaps he'll make a fairly good captain, after all, though he never can come up to Roger Eliot."

"Perhaps not," admitted Sage. "Eliot certainly was a natural leader at anything he undertook. I'm glad you came out yesterday."

"Oh, it isn't likely I'll get a chance to play."

"I'll guarantee you will if you pitch in. Why, there's Piper, the last fellow one would ever suppose could make good at the game."

"That's right," agreed Roy. "Say, he came round and interviewed me last night. He's got another bug in his bonnet. Asked me all sorts of questions about the strange man I saw in the woods. What do you suppose he thinks he's up to?"

"He's struck a trail," laughed Fred. "He was up at my house to see me, too."

"Well, it would give me some satisfaction if he could find out who the man was. Don't suppose you were able to enlighten him any?"

"Not a bit. I told you yesterday that I hadn't the remotest idea who the stranger could be."

"I know you did, but I thought you might have placed him since."

Down the river on the road to Clearport they entered a grove and sat chatting for some time on a fallen tree. Roy was anxious for another gunning expedition, but Fred feared that school work and football practice would give him little time for it. Finally they returned to the village, and Roy walked up Main Street to accompany his friend part of the way toward home.

On the sidewalk in front of Urian Eliot's house they saw Mr. Eliot talking with Lucius Timmick, the cashier of the bank. Timmick was a man under thirty years of age, thin, smooth-faced, save for some high cut "siders," and a trifle sanctimonious in his manner. He was dressed wholly in black and carried a Bible in his hand.

Mr. Eliot spoke pleasantly to the boys as they passed, and Timmick gave them a grudging nod.

"That dried-up shrimp makes me tired," muttered Hooker. "Just because Urian Eliot took him into the bank and made him cashier, he

thinks he's something. I know him; he always was a sneak. Why, he used to watch the boys nights and blow on them every time they had a little fun. He caught us hooking apples once, and made an awful fuss about it. Talked of having some of us sent to the reform school. Now he teaches a class in Sabbath School, and butter wouldn't melt in his mouth."

"It is evident," smiled Fred, "that you don't love Mr. Timmick much."

"You wouldn't think much of him either, if you'd lived long in Oakdale. He has too much dignity now to sneak round nights trying to find out what the fellows are doing, but he's just as much a fox as he ever was. If I was president of a bank, I'd never trust him to handle the cash."

"Evidently Mr. Eliot trusts him thoroughly."

"Oh, yes, he's got Urian Eliot fooled. Well, guess I'll hike for home, as Rod Grant would say. Bye, bye, old man."

Thus far Fred had found no good opportunity to tell his father privately about the mysterious

stranger and about what he had seen from his window the night before, nor did he find such a chance that day. The following morning he dismissed the matter from his mind, fancying it improbable that the man would again be seen around Oakdale.

CHAPTER VII.

ANNOYING ATTENTIONS.

Sleuth Piper seemed to develop a sudden remarkable fondness for Fred Sage, upon whom he persisted in thrusting himself whenever possible, although he endeavored to make his actions seem natural and unpremeditated. At the academy he hung around a great deal in Fred's vicinity, usually near enough to hear and understand anything Sage might say. Time after time he engaged Fred in conversation, which he usually brought about by speaking of school matters or sports in which the most of the boys were interested.

Monday morning, as he was making his way to the academy, Fred had been a bit surprised to encounter Sleuth in the vicinity of the Methodist church, for Piper, if also bound for school, had come a considerable distance out of his way.

This action seemed to be explained, however, when the queer fellow betrayed a certain amount of anxiety lest Sage had broken his promise to maintain secrecy regarding the Saturday night interview at Fred's house.

"What do you take me for, Piper?" exclaimed Fred, annoyed. "When I get ready to tell about that, I'll let you know in advance."

"No offence, old fellow," said Sleuth hastily. "You understand anyone can let such things leak unintentionally."

That night, after the shower in the gym following practice on the field, Sleuth was waiting to join Fred and persisted in walking all the way home with him, maintaining a confidential atmosphere, which seemed to invite confidence and trust on the part of the other. This effort was so palpably apparent that, although inwardly annoyed, Sage could not help laughing over it when Sleuth finally set off for his own home.

"The chump!" he muttered. "He thinks he's clever, but it's easy enough to see through him."

But when, on the following morning, Sleuth

again joined Fred on the way to school, Sage could scarcely restrain his annoyance. Succeeding, however, he tried the effect of joshing and banter.

"Say, Sleuth," he laughed, "you've certainly taken a sudden pronounced liking for my society. I never dreamed you entertained such deep affection for me."

"Oh," returned Piper, with pretended carelessness, "I've always liked you, Fred, ever since you came here from—from— Let me see, where did you come from? I've forgotten."

"Perhaps you never knew."

"That's right, perhaps I didn't. Seems to me, though, I've heard it was somewhere in New York State. Is that right?"

"Let it go at that; it's near enough."

"Oh, if there's any reason why you don't care to tell, of course you've a right to decline to answer."

"Do you know, Sleuth, I always feel a natural disinclination to gratify the unwarranted curios-

ity of people who try to pry into affairs that are of no concern to them."

"Oh, piffle, Fred! I'm not prying. What's the matter with you? I was just thinking that probably before coming here you attended a school of more importance than Oakdale Academy. You knew as much about football as any fellow in this town when you appeared here, and that's how you happened to get on the team as quarterback last year. Eliot said you were the fellow best adapted for the position, and you proved that he was right by the way you filled it."

"Thanks for the taffy. Your generosity in handing it out has got me going. What do you want to know next? Ask and ye shall *not* receive. Rubber and you'll get it in the neck."

"Oh, all right, if you're going to take it that way," muttered Piper sourly. "Still, I don't see why you should be so thundering suspicious. That is, I don't see unless——"

"Unless I've some dark and terrible secret to conceal. You're still making a jack of yourself trying to connect the Sages with your desperate

jailbird, Gentleman Jim. It doesn't seem to me, my astute detective friend, that you're making much progress on your latest case. Apparently that reward is keeping well beyond the reach of your grasping fingers."

"Even Sherlock Holmes required a certain amount of time to solve his problems," reminded Piper, causing his companion to laugh loudly.

"As an imitator of the great Sherlock, you're a merry jest, Pipe. Go ahead and amuse yourself playing your little farce, but don't bother me."

It was difficult, however, to escape Piper, who again persisted in hovering about in Fred's vicinity throughout the day.

That night, shortly after four o'clock, Mrs. Sage, at work in her kitchen, was surprised and a little startled when Billy Piper came walking in through the door, which chanced to be standing open, as the day had been unusually warm for the season.

"Good evening," said the boy. "I just ran up to see Fred a minute. Is he around?"

"No, indeed," was the answer. "He never gets home now until after dark. Football practice keeps him. Don't you play on the team?"

"Oh, yes," answered Pipe easily; "but I don't have to practice all the time. You see, I'm pretty well up on the game. If you don't mind, I'll wait for Fred."

"Of course I don't mind, though it's likely he'll not be home for more than an hour."

"Oh, well, I'll just make myself comfortable till he comes. Thought perhaps he might have a book for me to read. I'm a great reader."

"There are some magazines on the sitting-room table."

"Thanks," said Sleuth, entering the room indicated. "I reckon they will do first-rate. Don't mind about me, Mrs. Sage. Here's a nice, comfortable chair, and I'll be all right."

Although she wondered that he should have come there expecting to find Fred at that time, Mrs. Sage attributed it to the boy's eccentricity, though occasionally she glanced into the sitting-room when passing the open door. Sleuth

seemed to be interested for a time in the magazines, but presently she discovered him gazing around the room, although he remained seated near the table. A few moments later she saw his face brighten up as his eyes discovered an old-fashioned family photograph album within reach of his hand. In a moment he was looking through the album, apparently deeply engrossed in the pictures it contained, and for some time he remained thus occupied. Mrs. Sage had almost forgotten the visitor when he reappeared in the kitchen.

"I don't believe I'll wait for Fred after all," said Sleuth. "I think I'll go home. Tell him when he comes that I was looking for a good book, but I don't believe he has anything of the kind that would suit me."

It was verging on twilight when Sleuth departed, and something like half an hour later Fred reached home. On being told by his mother of Piper's visit, the boy betrayed some surprise and a singular amount of annoyance.

"Confound that fellow!" he exclaimed. "I'd

like to know what he means. Did he try to pump you, mother?"

"Pump me? Why, no, I don't think——"

"Didn't ask you a whole lot of foolish questions, did he?"

"I don't think he asked me any questions at all."

"Well, what did he do while he was here?"

"Entertained himself by looking at some magazines in the sitting-room."

"He didn't go prowling around over the house?"

"He went no further than that room."

"Still, he had no business around here."

"He said that he came for a book. He wanted something to read."

"Bluff. He knows the stories I read wouldn't interest him at all. Furthermore, he knew when he came that I wasn't here. He got excused from practice to-night by saying that he had a cracking headache and felt ill."

"He didn't mention anything of the sort to me, and I'm sure he did not appear ill. I'm

afraid there's something wrong with that boy, Fred. You admitted yourself that some people thought him queer."

"I'll queer him, if he doesn't behave," muttered Fred.

On Wednesday morning Piper was not waiting for Sage on the way to school, but Fred found him with some other fellows at the academy. Straightway Sleuth was called aside by the vexed youth.

"Look here, Piper," said Fred grimly, "I want to know why you showed up at my house last night and asked for me, when you knew I was at practice on the field?"

"Why, didn't your mother tell you I wanted to borrow a book?" asked Sleuth innocently.

"Now don't try any of that on me," advised the other boy. "You knew I wouldn't have anything you'd care to read. Besides that, you pretended that you expected to find me home."

"Who said so?"

"My mother."

"Oh, she misunderstood me."

"But *I* don't misunderstand you, and I'll tell you now to keep away from me and my home in future. I mean it, too. This business of playing the detective may be amusing and interesting to you, but it's infernally annoying to anyone you happen to pester. I've had enough of it, and I won't stand any more. Get that?"

"Of course I get it," replied Sleuth sulkily. "I'm no fool."

"Then don't act like one. That's all I have to say." With which Fred turned sharply and walked away.

"Those who have guilty secrets," muttered Piper to himself, "are always annoyed by too much attention."

CHAPTER VIII.

HOOKER HAS A PLAN.

On Thursday afternoon the Oakdale football team put in the last strenuous practice before the first real game of the season, which was to be played Saturday on the home grounds, the contesting eleven coming from Barville. As far as possible Captain Stone had drilled a knowledge of the new rules into the heads of his followers, and although, like a good captain, he was not wholly satisfied either with their advancement or his own, he decided that stiff, strenuous practice work on Friday would not be advisable, considering the possibility that someone might get hurt, with insufficient time to recover before the Barville contest. Therefore he simply notified his teammates to come out Friday for a little brushing up in signals.

Encouraged by Sage, Hooker had practiced

faithfully, and had made a fairly good showing in the line of the scrub team when it played short periods against the regulars. Fortunately, Roy's "condition" had been excellent when he began this, and therefore, save for a few minor bruises and sprains, which caused temporary soreness or lameness, he escaped injury. He was feeling somewhat elated over this when he left the gymnasium in company with Fred.

"It doesn't seem to be such a tough old game, after all," said Roy. "Of course a fellow gets pounded around a lot, but it doesn't hurt him much if he's good and hard."

"That's the point generally overlooked by people who put up a holler against the game," said Fred. "Football isn't for babies and weaklings, and the fellow who goes into it should be in perfect health and hardened by training that will enable him to stand up under pounding and jolts which would put a feeble chap all to the bad in no time at all. Observe how quickly fellows in fine condition recover from injuries on the field which would seem sufficient to put them under

the doctor's care for weeks or months. When some foolish chap who is soft as mush or has some chronic weakness attempts to get into the game, notice how often it happens that he's the one seriously injured; and of course this gives people who do not understand the circumstances and who are opposed to the game a chance to raise a great to-do."

"My folks have never wanted me to play."

"Well, mine are not enthusiastically in favor of my playing, although my mother is the chief objector. But she's always worrying about me of late, no matter what I do. It has been that way ever since——" He checked himself suddenly.

"Ever since what?" asked Roy.

"Oh," answered Fred evasively, "ever since I got old enough to go in for such things. She doesn't like to have me go gunning, and she actually cried when father bought me my gun."

"Oh, say," exclaimed Hooker quickly, "that makes me think of something. Why can't we get in a little shooting Saturday morning? There

ought to be ducks over in Marsh Pond, and we could try 'em Saturday, and arrange to get home by the middle of the forenoon—by half past ten or eleven, at the latest. That would give us plenty of time to rest up before the game."

"But Marsh Pond is nearly five miles from here, and, in order to get there early enough to pick up any ducks in the morning, we'd have to turn out in the middle of the night and make a stiff tramp of it. I'm afraid that would be a little too much, Hooker."

"Now listen to me; I have a plan. I'm not in favor of rising at two or three o'clock and hoofing it all that distance for half an hour's shooting after daybreak. You're as wise to the signals as any fellow on the team, aren't you?"

"I think so," nodded Fred modestly.

"Think so! Why, you've got them down pat. You can reel 'em off like hot shot, and you know every time just what you're firing at. A little signal practice to-morrow wouldn't do you any good, and, as I'm only a scrub man, it isn't worth my while bothering. I know where we can get a

good set of decoys to use on that duck hunt, and if you'll go I'll agree to get 'em. We can start right after school to-morrow, and I'll bet I can hire Abe Hubbard to take us over to the pond with his old horse and wagon. It won't cost a great deal, for Hubbard isn't doing much of anything, and he'd be glad to pick up a dollar. It wouldn't surprise me if the sight of a whole dollar would hire him to tote us over there and come for us any time we might set on Saturday. If I can fix it," he concluded eagerly, "will you go?"

They had paused in front of the post-office, and Fred meditated a moment over the proposal. They were standing there as Sleuth Piper came up, passed them and entered the building, turning to cast a swift glance in their direction.

"It listens good, Hooker," said Fred, tempted; "but where are we going to stay all night? Have you thought of that?"

"You bet I have. Why, don't you remember there's an old camp over there, which nobody ever uses nowadays? It has a stone fireplace,

and if we take an axe along to cut wood we can be as comfortable as you please."

It was not remarkable that the temptation grew, for what real boy would not be lured by the prospect of a night in an old camp in the woods?

"It listens good," repeated Fred, smiling a bit; "but how about a boat? Without a dog to do our retrieving, if we shoot anything we'll certainly need a boat. Spot is no water dog, and he'd be practically useless for us."

"There isn't any boat," admitted Roy; "but I know where there's an old raft on the shore within twenty rods of the shooting blind some hunters made last fall. I know the raft ought to be there, for I used it when I was over there fishing once this summer. I saw the blind and inspected it, too, and it will be all right for us without doing a thing to it. It's close by the feeding grounds at the western end of the lake and will serve us much better than a new one, as the ducks are thoroughly accustomed to the sight of it by this time. You know how they shy some-

times at a newly built blind they've never seen before. With that raft near by for our use, we can pick up any ducks we knock down. Come on, Fred, of course you'll go."

"I'll speak to Stone about it in the morning."

"That would be rather late, for you know I've got to see Hubbard and fix it with him. Why not see Stone to-night? Give him a good game of talk. Tell him you feel the need of something like this to brace you up. Hard study, regular practice, monotony, anxiety about the game—you know the sort of argument to put up. He'll be a chump if he refuses. Why, if I was on the team I'd simply see him and tell him I was going to go anyhow."

"And you'd put yourself in bad with old Stoney. He's an easy-going fellow in some things, but when it comes to football matters he believes in discipline and enforces it, too."

"Yes," nodded Roy, "he's a little too stiff to suit me; something of a tyrant, it seems."

"Not a tyrant; simply a captain who knows what is right and demands it of his followers.

If Stone says he doesn't think I should go, of course I won't, that's all."

"But you will if he'll agree?" cried Hooker exultantly. "Say, old man, leave it to me; let me talk to Ben. I'll tell him you want to go, but don't like to ask the privilege."

"And that would be the truth."

"Sure. No need to lie about it. Think perhaps he can put a substitute in your place, same as he would have to do if you were hurt in a game, and that will be a good thing, as it will brace the sub up on signaling. Will you leave it to me, old chap?"

After a little hesitation, Sage agreed. "Go ahead; have your own way about it. If Ben says it's all right, I'll go ducking with you."

"I'll let you know this very evening," promised Hooker, as his friend started up the street toward home.

Sage did not see Piper come quickly out of the post-office and hasten after Roy. Having observed the two boys in earnest consultation, Sleuth's curiosity was at white heat.

Near eight o'clock that evening Hooker came to see Fred at the latter's home.

"It's all right," he announced in enthusiastic triumph. "I brought Stone round nicely, and he says you may go. I've seen Hubbard, too, and fixed it up with him. He'll be ready to start right after school to-morrow, and he'll come for us at half past nine Saturday morning."

Fred's mother was listening with sudden interest. "What are you planning, boys?" she asked.

Fred explained, observing that her face took on a shade of anxiety.

"Now don't begin to worry, mother," he begged. "You know Roy and I are both careful with guns, and there isn't a bit of danger. I don't want to fret you, but I hope you won't object."

She sighed a little. "I suppose it's foolish, but I can't help feeling anxious about you when you go gunning. However, your father bought you the gun, and, now that you have it, it wouldn't seem reasonable for me to seek to pre-

vent you from getting some pleasure through the use of it."

"All boys love a gun," smiled Andrew Sage, "and the right sort of a boy rarely gets hurt with one."

"Then it's all fixed," laughed Roy. "Get everything ready to start right away after school, Fred. Take along a blanket, for you'll need it in the old camp. If we have any luck at all, we ought to bring home some ducks."

Roy had been gone some time when Fred's mother came up quietly behind his chair, bent over him and put her arms about his neck.

"Don't think me foolish, my dear," she said in a low tone. "You understand why I can't help worrying. You're the only boy I have left, now."

CHAPTER IX.

THE CAMP IN THE WOODS.

Something over four miles from Oakdale Abel Hubbard reined his horse into an old road which led from the main highway into the depths of the woods. Fred and Roy, with their outfits, were in the wagon, and, the time being short ere darkness must come on, they urged Hubbard to make haste.

"Can't hit any high places along this old road," answered the fat little village constable. "If I tried it, I'd bounce ye both out in no time. 'Tain't fur to the pond now, so what's the use to be in such an all-fired rush? All I want to do is git back on to the main road before it sets in dark."

"But we've got some things to do ourselves," said Roy. "We've got to find the old raft and have it ready for use in the morning, besides cut-

ting firewood and getting settled down for the night."

"That hadn't orter take ye long. I'll git ye there as soon's I can. It's sort of an accommodation, anyhow. I wouldn't think of making both trips for anybody else unless they paid me twice as much."

"You're not very busy these days, are you, Mr. Hubbard?" asked Fred, smiling a little. "It seems to me an easy way for you to pick up a dollar."

"Oh, I could be busy," returned the man, "if I wanted to work for Lem Hayden in his quarry or kilns, and I guess I could find a job in the mills; but, as a regular commissioned officer, it's my duty to be unhampered and ready for anything that may turn up. If I was workin' and Sheriff Pickle happened to need me, I'd have to knock off."

Real work had never seemed to have much fascination for Abel Hubbard.

"Then there are plenty of jobs a man might get around Oakdale," said Roy. "If a stranger

should show up with references, he could find something to do, couldn't he?"

"Reckon he could, such as it was. I don't cal'late them Dagoes in the quarries bring many references."

"You haven't seen any stranger around town recently looking for work, have you?"

"No, don't think I have."

"I didn't know," said Roy. "Last Saturday, while gunning with Fred, I met a man who said he was in search of a job, and he asked me about the chances in town. I haven't seen anything of him since."

"I generally take special notice of everybody that comes inter Oakdale," asserted Constable Hubbard. "I cal'late it's good policy to do so. Ain't nobody new showed up lately, so I guess your man didn't stop around here."

"I don't believe he did," said Roy.

Presently they reached the old camp, from which, through the trees, they could get a glimpse of the pond. It did not take them long to jump out and unload their belongings, which

were carried into the camp, the door being fastened merely by a wooden peg thrust through a staple. Hubbard backed his wagon round, bade them good luck and drove off into the shadows which were gathering in the woods.

"Well, here we are, Roy," said Fred.

"Yes, and it's up to us to hustle. Let's look for that raft while it's light enough to find it. We can get together firewood later. Come on."

Leaving their property in the camp, they hurried to the pond, and Hooker led the way along the marshy shore. The water-grass and rushes stood thick and rank at this end of the lake, and soon Hooker pointed out a mass of dead brush in the midst of the reeds some distance from the marshy shore.

"There's the old blind," he said. "You can see it is located so it commands the cove beyond, and that's where the ducks coming in to feed usually 'light."

"How does a fellow get out to the blind?"

"Wade. The water won't come up to your knees. There's a sort of little knoll or island out

there, and the brush has been built up and woven into the branches of an old fallen tree that may have grown on that knoll before the water was so high. It's a fine chance all right. But come on, we must dig that raft out."

They went forward again, and suddenly, with a splash and a sound of throbbing wings, a small duck rose amid the rushes and went flying away over the bosom of the lake.

"Hang it all!" exclaimed Roy in vexation. "Just look at that! If we'd brought our guns, we might have knocked her down. That's a young duck, or it would have flown before we got anywhere near. Young ones always hide if they can, until they get thoroughly used to the idea that their wings will serve them better. We'll get some shooting here in the morning, mark what I say."

The raft was found where Hooker expected to find it. It was a small affair and would support only one of the boys, but would be sufficient for their use in picking up such ducks as they might shoot. With the raft there was a long pole and

a piece of board that had been roughly hewn into the shape of a paddle.

When the raft was floated Roy got on it and poled it around into the little cove near the blind, where he succeeded in concealing it quite effectively amid the grass and reeds. Then he waded ashore in his water-tight boots without sinking nearly as much as he had thought he would.

"That's done," he said. "Now we'll get back to the camp and chop our firewood while we can see to do it. There are no signs to indicate that anyone has shot from the blind this fall, and therefore the ducks ought to come up to it without fear."

Soon the strokes of an axe were ringing through the gloomy woods as Sage worked at the trunk of a dry fallen tree. Hooker carried the wood into the camp and piled it beside the old stone fireplace. Sunset's faint afterglow faded from the sky, and with gathering darkness the atmosphere took on a sharp, nipping chill, which, however, was little felt by the active boys. Sage continued chopping, while Hooker

found time between armfuls to build a fire. Through the open door of the camp Fred saw the welcoming glow of the flames, and it gave him a feeling of buoyancy, of keen relish, of intense satisfaction in life and the pleasures thereof. It was good to be there with his chum in those dark and silent autumn woods, making ready to spend the night together in that old camp before the duck hunt that was to come in the crispness of gray dawn.

Hooker's figure was silhouetted in the open doorway.

"I say, old man," he called, as he came out, "there has been somebody in this camp lately."

"That so? I thought you said you were sure no one had used the shooting blind."

"I am; I'll bet on it. I looked to see, and I could tell that no one had been there. They would have left tracks and marks and probably empty shells. Whoever it was that stopped in the camp, they did not try any shooting from the blind. And say, I'll bet somebody was in that camp last night. I thought I caught a smell of

tobacco smoke when we first opened the door, but it was so dusky inside that I didn't notice anything else. There's fresh-cut boughs in the bunk, and the ashes in the fireplace were hardly cold. I found crumbs on the floor, too, and part of a newspaper not quite two weeks old."

"Then I reckon you're right," agreed Sage, "though I don't quite see why anyone should stop in the old camp this time of year, unless he came here to shoot ducks. We'd have been in a scrape if we'd found someone here ahead of us to-night."

They bore the last of the wood inside and threw it down on a heaping pile beside the now merrily blazing fire, which illumined the entire interior of the camp. Hooker had thoughtfully brought a can of water from a near-by spring, and, thus prepared, they were ready to settle down to the supper of sandwiches and doughnuts put up for them by their mothers.

Roy closed and fastened the door with the inside hasp.

"You can see," he said, with a gesture toward

the old bunk at one side of the room, "those boughs on top are fresh cut."

"That's right," nodded Sage, after examining them. "Hacked off with a jackknife, I should say, and not two days old. Well, somebody was kind enough to help make us comfortable, for, with our blankets and a fire going, we ought to find that bunk all right to-night. I'm really much obliged to the unknown person or persons. I presume there may have been more than one."

"Here's that part of a newspaper," said Roy, taking it from the small rough table that had been nailed against the wall opposite the bunk. "The date on it is enough to show that someone has been here lately."

Fred took the paper and glanced at it carelessly. In a moment, however, a queer expression flashed across his face, his eyes opened wide, his lips puckered, and he gave a long, low whistle.

"What is it?" questioned the boy.

"By Jove!" muttered Sage wonderingly. And then, after a moment of silence, he repeated with greater emphasis: "By Jove!"

"What is it?" exclaimed Hooker.

"This paper," answered Fred, staring at some headlines in bold-faced type. "It's either a part of the same one or a duplicate of an issue I saw in the possession of Billy Piper last Saturday night."

CHAPTER X.

A PERPLEXING QUESTION.

The black headlines which had attracted Fred's eye told of the five hundred dollar reward offered for the capture of Jim Wilson, who had escaped from the Harpersville jail after a murderous assault on the guard. The manner in which the paper had been folded indicated that this sensational article had been left outermost, and the blurred ink and wear in the creases of the folds bespoke the fact that the paper had been carried around in someone's pocket.

"Piper?" muttered Hooker. "Why, it isn't likely that he has been here."

"It doesn't seem at all likely," agreed Sage; "but still——"

"What was he doing with the paper, anyhow?"

Fred turned sidewise, so that the bright light

from the open fire fell full on the page, and his finger indicated the news article which had held such deep interest for Sleuth.

"See that?"

"Yes," said Roy, peering over his chum's shoulder. " 'Five hundred dollars reward. Desperate character breaks jail after murderous assault on keeper.' Oh, yes, that's the sort of stuff that would interest old Sleuthy."

"I've kept my promise to Piper to say nothing about his wild theory," said Fred, "and, a full week having passed with no result, I don't fancy it will do him any good for me to continue a clam. I was sure there was nothing in it, anyhow. You see, Piper had a crazy notion that this escaped criminal and the stranger you talked with last Saturday might be identical. It's rather odd that the printed description of James Wilson, as given here, corresponds with your description of the man who talked with you and ran away at my approach. Here it is."

His eyes puckered, his lips pursed a little, Hooker read the description of Gentleman Jim.

"Why, that's right," he said slowly. "It does sort of fit, and no mistake. But Pipe didn't say anything about this to me. You know I told you how he came round and asked me a lot of questions, some of which I couldn't answer, and the most of which seemed more or less foolish. He tried to find out everything I knew about you and your folks, seeming especially anxious to learn where you came from when you moved into Oakdale. Now what's that got to do with this stuff in the newspaper?"

Fred laughed shortly. "You see," he explained, with a touch of scorn, "Sleuth was trying to connect us somehow with the notorious and desperate Mr. Wilson."

"How could he do that?"

"Have you forgotten that your stranger made inquiries concerning the Sages in Oakdale? Now you tumble; you're on. If that man was Wilson, he would not make such inquiries without some knowledge of us, and, if he knew us, it was natural to suppose that we knew him. I

informed Piper that I had never heard of such a man."

"That should have ended it."

"Not with Sleuth. Doubtless he reasoned that if we had ever known this criminal we would, most naturally, be sure to deny the fact."

"But you never did know him?"

Sage shot his friend a quick, resentful glance. "Do you think I'd lie, even to Piper?"

"Of course not."

"I never heard of this James Wilson, *alias* Gentleman Jim, until Sleuth told me about him. My denial, however, had little effect on Piper, who hinted at family skeletons hidden away in closets and then proceeded to watch me in true dime novel detective style. For a day or two I couldn't shake him; he hung around me all the time. At last I got tired of it and gave him to understand flatly that he'd better let up."

"By Jingoes!" laughed Roy. "He was watching you last night. After we fixed it up for this little expedition and you had started for home, Piper overtook me and casually did a little pump-

ing. Reckon I was easy, for I told him all about it. Say, you don't suppose——" Roy paused, as if wondering over an idea that had flashed into his mind.

"What?"

"You don't suppose he came here to this camp after that? Perhaps he dropped the paper himself."

Following a moment's thought, Sage shook his head. "It was after dark last night when he found out what we had arranged to do, Roy. Piper was at school to-day, and we left him starting out for practice with the rest of the team. While it's not impossible, it's most improbable that he visited this place after learning we were coming here, and got home in time to attend school. The signs of a recent fire in the fireplace and the fresh boughs on the bunk we may accept as positive assurance that someone spent last night here. Under any circumstances, Sleuth wouldn't do that—alone."

"Never," agreed Hooker, with conviction. "This piece of newspaper must have been left

here by someone else. It's a mere coincidence that it happens to be the same issue shown you by Piper, and it isn't worth bothering our brains over any further. I'm hungry. Let's eat."

"All right," agreed Fred, putting the newspaper into his pocket.

Their lunch was opened up and placed on the table. Two old boxes served them as chairs. The warmth of the fire made the camp quite comfortable, and its light was sufficient for their needs. Sitting there and chatting after the manner of bosom chums, they thoroughly enjoyed their supper.

After supper there was much to talk over, things of mutual interest which kept them for a time wide awake and in excellent humor. As it was required, they placed fresh wood on the fire, reserving the heavier sticks for the long hours of the night, when they would need a slower blaze.

The guns were looked over and fondled affectionately, while they discussed their hunting experiences, laughing with relish over blunders

and failures which had seemed most annoying at the time of their occurrence. They examined the decoys Hooker had borrowed, making sure they were properly "strung" and ready for setting. Football and school affairs also furnished topics for chatting and laughter and the expression of more or less dogmatic opinions. At times in the lulls of their talk they heard the night wind in the trees outside, and occasional puffs coming down the chimney blew a little smoke back into the camp, the odor of which did not, however, become strong enough to be offensive.

Behind them the firelight flung their shadows, huge and wavering, against the camp wall, and, looking round once by chance, Sage was startled to observe those shadows hovering there like something silent and sinister and menacing. Although he did not refer again to the strange man Roy had encountered, he was wondering who that man could have been.

"Whoo!" cried an owl from the blackness of the woods.

Their chatter grew less; at last it ceased. They

sat silently gazing at the fire, with its bed of glowing coals. Hooker moved, stretched and yawned.

"It's me for the sleeps," he announced drowsily, producing a dollar watch and beginning to wind it. "We've got to be up and in that blind ready for business before peep o' day, you know."

"I'm ready to turn in," said Fred.

"Fellow who sleeps on the front side of the bunk will have to replenish the fire once in a while. We can change round in the night and take turns at it. How are you about waking up?"

"Pretty good. I'll take my turn first."

Some heavy logs were placed on the fire, and Roy rolled himself into his blanket, an example which Sage soon followed. In a few moments Hooker was sound asleep, as his breathing indicated, but for a long time Fred lay thinking and wondering. He could not rid himself of the conviction that the discovery in that old camp of the newspaper containing the account of Gentle-

man Jim's jail-break bore a significance unexplained and uncomprehended. If that paper had not been left there by Piper, who had left it?

"Whoo!" again cried the owl.

CHAPTER XI.

THE HIDDEN SPORTSMEN.

Taking turns, the boys rose several times during the night and replenished the fire. At best, the bough bed was none too comfortable, but toward morning both lads slept soundly for some time.

Awaking suddenly after this period of slumber, Sage lifted himself to his elbow and listened, impressed by the hazy conviction that he had been aroused by an unusual sound. The fire had sunk to a mass of coals and embers, from which emanated a faint glow that barely reached across the stone hearth of the fireplace. Beyond that dim gleam of light the interior of the camp was wrapped in dense darkness. The wind no longer roamed amid the treetops, and not even a breath came down the chimney to disturb the gray ashes in the fireplace.

Fred's heart thumped annoyingly, while his ears were reaching out for a repetition of the sound that had awakened him; and, when he had begun to think it must have been a creation of his imagination or dreams, it came again.

It was like footsteps—stealthy, cautious footsteps, which, however, seemed to move a bit uncertainly in the darkness. It seemed like one or more persons walking in the woods a short distance from the camp and occasionally stumbling a bit, although moving slowly and with considerable caution. The sounds were receding.

"It must be some straying animal," thought Fred.

Fainter and fainter grew the sounds. Once or twice there came a cracking, as of dead branches beneath a heavy foot, and at last the listening lad heard something that sent a shock through him. It was like the suppressed murmur of human voices, and was followed immediately by a low, soft, short whistle.

Sage grasped Hooker and gave him a shake.

"Hey? What is it?" mumbled Roy, awakened.

"Hush!" breathed Fred excitedly. "There's someone prowling around this camp. Don't make a noise. Listen."

Breathless, they listened for a full minute, but now the woods seemed silent and lifeless, and not a thing could they hear.

"Guess you're mistaken, Fred," said Roy in a low tone. "You must have been dreaming."

"I wasn't dreaming," asserted Sage positively; "I never was more wide awake in all my life. Keep still a little longer."

For a long time they remained silent, gradually growing tired and cramped by the rigid tensity of their bodies.

"They've gone," decided Sage at last.

"They?" questioned Roy. "Was there more than one?"

"Two, at least. I heard them talking."

"Oh, say, Fred, you must be mistaken. Who would come prowling around in these black woods at this hour?"

"I haven't an idea who it was, but I'll stake my life on it that it was somebody. Nothing in

the world could convince me that I was mistaken."

"Oh, well, if you're so positive—— But it seems ridiculous, impossible, preposterous. It's pitch dark, and no one would be wandering through these woods under such circumstances."

Fred threw off his blanket and got up. "I don't blame you for thinking so, and I would say the same if I had not heard them. What makes it all the more unaccountable is the fact that they were sneaking. They were using the utmost caution in their movements, Hooker, and when a person sneaks he's up to something."

"Perhaps," said Roy, with an attempt at persiflage, "it was their design to murder and rob us for our vast wealth."

"Whatever their design may have been," said Sage, putting some small dry wood on the coals of the fire, "it was not honest and open. People do not creep around through the night like cutthroats unless they're up to something that won't bear inspection."

"If I didn't know you as well as I do," said

Roy, "I'd say you had a bad attack of nerves. What time is it, anyhow?"

A little flame leaped up from the dry wood, and by the light of this Sage looked at his watch. "It's almost five o'clock," he answered in surprise.

"Jingoes!" exclaimed the other boy, rising with a bound. "It's time we were getting out. With sunrise an hour away, we've got to do some tall hustling."

Fred agreed to this, and, although still disturbed and perplexed over what he had heard, he imitated Roy in losing no time about the preparations to set forth. They pulled on their boots, gray sweaters and coats, and gathered up the guns, ammunition and decoys. Then the door was opened, and they went out into the blackness of the last hour of night. The sky must have been overcast, for above the treetops there was no gray hint of light to suggest the coming dawn. The air was still and impregnated with the coldness that suggested Thanksgiving, turkey, plum pudding and skating.

"I know the best way," said Hooker. "Follow me close."

Even though Roy knew the way, as they proceeded toward the pond Sage was impressed by the conviction that they made at least double the noise that had been made by the unknown prowlers. Reaching the pond, they hurried forward toward the blind, but only for Hooker, they would have passed it. Ankle deep, they waded out through the swishing grass and reeds, and found the old raft where it had been left.

"Only one of us can work on the raft," said Roy. "You take the guns into the blind, while I set the decoys."

With no time to waste, Roy worked as swiftly as possible. From the blind Fred could see the dark figure of his chum, kneeling on the raft, as he spread the decoys out so that they would float upon the water in a natural manner and anchored them with the weights. As soon as this was done, Hooker poled the old raft back into the cover of the reeds and hurried to join Sage.

"Barely made it," he chuckled. "There's one

thing we have to thank your prowling friends for; if we'd slept half an hour longer, it's likely we would have gotten out here too late for the first flights. It's getting light now in the east."

It was true that far over the eastern end of the pond a dull, grayish light was beginning to make itself apparent low down upon the horizon, and as this slowly spread it was reflected on the glassy, uprippled surface of the water.

"Get ready for shooting," said Hooker eagerly, as he broke his gun and thrust two shells into the barrels.

"I'm loaded up already," stated Fred, settling down with his repeater in a position which would enable him to shoot toward the decoys as well as watch the open stretch of the pond, up which the birds were expected to come from the eastward.

Hooker knelt and tried aiming over the top of the blind, swinging his gun to follow the movements of some imaginary ducks.

"All right," he laughed softly; "let 'em come."

With each passing moment the grayness in the east continued to spread, until they could see

the wooded outlines of the shores, bordered by deep shadows. Morning did not break with a blush, but seemed to awaken reluctantly and heavily, like a person aged and weary. Its chill bit their noses, and would have benumbed their fingers, only for the heavy protecting gloves they wore.

Suddenly Fred gave a low, electrifying hiss. "Birds!" he whispered, snatching the loose glove from his right hand. "Here they come!"

Their nerves atingle, they crouched low, peering forth from the blind. Against the eastern sky they could see some small, black, swiftly moving specks, which they knew were ducks coming up the pond and doubtless headed for the feeding grounds at the western end. The guns were held ready for quick use, while the boys watched those black specks coming nearer and nearer, skimming through the air slightly higher than the treetops on the shore.

"They'll come in here sure!" breathed Hooker. "Be ready to nail them when they settle. Fire

when they discover the decoys aren't the real thing and start to rise again."

But barely had he uttered the words when, from a mass of swamp bushes on a low point that thrust itself out into the pond a short distance away, two puffs of smoke leaped upward, followed by the reports of two guns, and, short-stopped in their flight, two of the ducks came tumbling downward to splash into the water. Immediately, with quacks of alarm, the others rose higher and whirled away. A third shot was fired from the point, but apparently it was a clean miss, as not one of the frightened and fleeing ducks betrayed a symptom of being hit.

Thunderstruck, Sage and Hooker stared dumbly toward the cover from which the unknown hunters had fired. After a time Roy savagely exclaimed:

"What do you think of that! Wouldn't it kill you dead!"

"It killed our chance at those birds," returned Fred, as he regretfully watched them disappearing above the treetops. "Who the dickens can it be?"

"We ought to find out pretty quick. They'll have to pick up those two ducks."

Eagerly and wrathfully they continued to watch, and after some moments they saw a small object moving out from the point toward the floating ducks.

"They've got a retriever," growled Sage, with increased disgust. "They're lying low and sending the dog to bring their game."

"Confound their hides!" raged Hooker. "They're going to spoil our fun, just as true as you live. I'd like to punch their heads!"

"It would be a great satisfaction," said Sage bitterly.

"Look here, old man," said Roy, smitten by a thought, "there are your sneaking prowlers. They are the gentlemen who woke you as they passed the camp. I'll bet anything they had just come in by the old wood road."

"I'm inclined to think you're right," admitted Fred. "But why were they so careful about making a noise? Hook, they must have known there was someone in that camp."

"Wouldn't surprise me if you had stated the reason for their caution. Furthermore, they must be wise to the way the ducks usually fly here, and they have the advantage of us by hiding on that point."

One after another, the dog retrieved the dead birds and carried them to the point, finally disappearing from view.

"If some of the birds will only keep far enough from that point, we may get some shooting yet, old man," said Roy hopefully.

In a short time another flock, larger than the first, was seen coming up the pond, and, to the great satisfaction of the boys, they were flying over the exact middle of the water, and would therefore pass beyond gun-shot of the unknown hunters, unless they should change their course.

"It's our turn now," exulted Roy. "I think that bunch will come in here. Something doing in a minute or two, old chap."

There was—something tremendously provoking; for, as the flock came opposite the low point, both of the unseen sportsmen fired, although,

with any reasonable amount of judgment, they must have realized that there was not one chance in a thousand that they could make a kill. Those shots, however, were sufficient to cause the flock to swerve, swing about in a half circle, and go speeding off into the distance.

Hooker said something violent, while Sage ground his strong teeth together.

"The 'chumps! The miserable, sneaking idiots!" raged Roy. "If they have a bit of sense in their bone-heads, they must have known they couldn't start a feather at that distance. Why do you suppose they were foolish enough to try it?"

"I can't imagine any reason, unless they were determined to spoil our chance," answered Fred, who was now furious enough to fight. "If they keep that addle-pated business up, we won't get a shot this morning."

"Slim chance of it now, anyhow. It's broad daylight, and we've lost our opportunity at two flocks. There may be other birds coming in, but those that have heard the firing will be likely to

keep away from this end of the pond. It's rotten, that's what it is."

"With good luck, we might have knocked down half a dozen out of that last big bunch. Whoever those chaps are, they're poor sportsmen."

"They're nasty sneaks; that's my opinion."

In the course of ten minutes three ducks, evidently a remnant of a flock, came winging close to the point, and with four shots the hidden hunters tumbled the trio of birds into the water. One was wounded, for it flopped about after splashing into the pond, but soon another shot from the bushes finished it. Then the dog swam out and did the work of retrieving.

"It's all off," sighed Sage. "Our morning's sport is ruined."

"Hardly a doubt of it," agreed his companion. "That is, as far as shooting ducks is concerned. I propose to have a look at the gentlemen who have tricked us in this brilliant and commendable manner. They aren't going to get away

before I see them and tell them a few things. Come on; we can gather up the decoys later."

"You don't think it's any use to wait a little longer, Roy?" asked Fred, loath to release the skirts of hope.

"Not a bit. Besides, I'd rather face those chaps now than to kill one or two stray ducks."

Leaving the blind, they hurried to the shore and turned their footsteps toward the point upon which the rival duck hunters were ensconced. Realizing it was wholly probable that their movements had been observed, they lost no time in plunging forward through the woods and thickets, fearing that the ones they sought might take alarm and depart.

Bursting forth from the bushes side by side, they halted as they reached the point, beholding two boys leaving the shelter in which they had been hidden, burdened by guns and the slain ducks and followed by a water-spaniel. These boys stopped as Sage and Hooker appeared before them.

One was Jack Nelson; the other Sleuth Piper.

CHAPTER XII.

DISAPPOINTED DUCK HUNTERS.

"Well, I'll be switched!" exclaimed Hooker, in mingled astonishment and anger.

Nelson, whose dog had done the retrieving, beamed pleasantly on the disappointed and wrathy young sportsmen. "Good morning," he said. "You're out for a little shooting, I see. Had any luck?"

"Yes—rotten," flung back Hooker. "Confound you fellows! you spoiled the morning for us."

"Really?" chirped Nelson, in pretended surprise, elevating his eyebrows. "How was that?"

"You know how," grated Sage hotly. "You did it purposely, too. But I suppose it was that pestering, sly, conceited, cheap imitator of Sherlock Holmes who is really responsible."

Piper looked aggrieved. "If you're referring

to me," he said, "permit me to inform you that I'm not at all pleased by your insulting language."

"I didn't intend you should be," Fred flung back; "and you'd be less pleased if I could find appropriate words to express my opinion of you. It was a miserable, low-down trick you fellows played on us this morning, and you know it."

"Now hold on," Nelson commanded, his cheerful manner vanishing. "We won't stand for any of that. We've as much right to shoot ducks on this pond as you have."

"Of course we have," Piper backed him up; "but Sage seems to have an idea that he owns the earth—that's what's the matter with him."

Fred levelled his finger at the speaker's face. "You have annoyed me to the limit recently," he grated. "After getting a crazy notion into your head, you've dogged me around constantly. You found out that Roy and I were coming here to shoot ducks this morning, for, without suspecting your design, he let you pump him. Straightway, in a highly commendable manner, you ar-

ranged to sneak in here some time in the night, and you planked yourself on this point, where you could bang away at the ducks as they flew past, knowing perfectly well that every time you'd fire into a flock you'd frighten them so that they would not come to our decoys. A fine piece of work!"

"I say, Sage, you take it hard, don't you?" laughed Nelson. "Even if we knew you were coming to the lake, we had a right to do so ourselves. And as long as you had not possession of this point, which is the only place, besides the old blind, from which any successful shooting can be done at this end of the pond, it surely was our privilege to grab it. Come, come, don't be a squealer. I've always considered you game, but you're showing another side."

"Once," said Fred, "you deliberately fired at a passing flock when you must have known the birds were beyond gun-shot. If you did not do that to frighten them from coming to our decoys, why did you do it?"

"Yes," cried Hooker, "explain that."

"We took a chance on bringing one down, that's all," said Nelson.

"Oh, don't bother yourself to explain," Piper put in quickly. "It's no use; they won't believe you. We've got to get home. Let's not stand here chewing the rag."

"A good punching is what you deserve," snarled Hooker, "and I think we could hand it to you, too."

"Permit me to express doubts," said Nelson. "If you want to try it, you've a splendid opportunity."

It was a tense moment, for both Fred and Roy had been striving hard to hold themselves in check, and the insolent defiance of the other pair was almost too much for them to swallow. It was Sage's level head that averted the clash. Knowing someone might be seriously hurt in a hand-to-hand fight, and remembering that the first football game of the season would take place that afternoon, he put forth a hand and grasped Hooker's sleeve.

"We won't scrap with them," he said in a low

tone. "They have shown what they are; let them get as much satisfaction out of it as they can."

Piper, who had not really relished the prospect of a fist-fight, braced up wonderfully, while Nelson laughed again.

"You're showing a little sense now," said the latter, "which, doubtless, you'll realize when you come to think it over. The joke is on you, and you may as well accept it in that light. It's too bad you didn't get even a shot at anything, but you can't expect to go home loaded with game every time you hunt. Some rather pretty birds we have got, eh?" He held them up tantalizingly, which caused Hooker's teeth to snap together and his hands to clench.

"Come, Roy," urged Sage, "let's go back and gather up our decoys."

Reluctantly Hooker permitted his chum to swing him about, and he muttered under his breath:

"Sometime I'll even it up with this pair. They'll get what's coming, all right."

As they were returning for the decoys they

heard for a time the voices of Piper and Nelson, who seemed to be in high spirits, for they burst into frequent peals of laughter. Finally the irritating sounds died out as the triumphant duck hunters receded into the distance, following the old wood-road toward the main highway.

Grimly the disappointed lads gathered up the decoys and returned to the old camp. Sage was the first to show signs of reviving good nature, which symptoms at first caused Hooker more or less irritation.

"Perhaps you can take it that way, Fred," said Roy; "but I can't. It was a dirty piece of business, although it may seem very shrewd and humorous to Piper and Nelson."

Their blankets being rolled up and everything made ready for the appearance of Abel Hubbard, they still had some time to wait for the village constable, and this time they spent discussing the affair. Suddenly, as if struck by a thought, Fred clapped his hand to his pocket and drew forth the remnant of a newspaper that had been found in the camp.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed; "that's queer. I wish I'd questioned Sleuth about it."

"What are you driving at now?" asked his companion.

"It just occurred to me that, after all, this paper may have been dropped here by Piper, although I don't quite understand how it could have been. If so, he must have come here recently—as recently as yesterday or the day before."

"Nothing to it," declared Hooker positively. "He was at school both those days, and he has practiced regularly with the teams every night. He had no time to come here."

"Unless he did so in the night—night before last. But I don't see why he——"

"You couldn't hire him to come here alone at night," asserted Hooker; "he's too big a coward. A great detective should have plenty of courage, but a rabbit is a lion compared with Sleuthy."

"He may have had someone with him."

"If so, it was some fellow we know, and we'll find out about it. But I don't think there's the

remotest chance that it can be so, for he would have announced the fact when we caught him face to face a short time ago. It would have served as an excuse for his presence this morning. Why, he could have claimed that he had come here ahead of us to look the ground over and plan for a duck hunt. He could have accused us of being encroachers. Forget it, Fred; Sleuth never dropped that paper in this camp."

"Which," said Sage regretfully, "leaves us just where we were before, up against a mystery. I'm not going to puzzle my head over it any more."

"A sensible decision," nodded Roy. "I'm inclined to fancy you've placed too much importance on that particular scrap of a newspaper."

Shortly before nine o'clock, as they were sitting on an old log in front of the camp, they heard the creaking of Hubbard's wagon, and directly the constable appeared with the conveyance.

"Mornin', boys," he saluted. "What luck?"

"Nothing but bad luck," answered Hooker.

"Some other chaps spoiled our shooting for us, and we didn't get as much as a feather."

"Sho! Now that's too bad. I cal'late I seen them other chaps. Met 'em on the road almost to town. They was Jack Nelson and Billy Piper, and they had some birds. Seemed to feel purty nifty and chipper, too, for they laughed when they spied me. Told me I'd better get a stouter wagon to haul in my load, but I didn't know just what they meant."

"Those chaps have a perverted sense of humor," rasped Roy. "They'll get it taken out of them some day. Come on, Fred, let's throw our dunnage aboard and set sail. I'm anxious to get home to rest up before that game this afternoon."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TARDY QUARTERBACK.

The members of the Oakdale football team were gathering at the gymnasium to dress and prepare for the game. Singly and in groups they came hurrying in to open their lockers and drag forth suits, cleated shoes, shin guards, head pieces, nose protectors and other paraphernalia. Some were in high spirits, while others, as if impressed by the importance of the approaching contest, appeared somewhat serious and grim. Chipper Cooper, always volatile and lively, persisted in perpetrating some very bad puns, being finally given a call-down by Sile Crane, who was wearing an almost funereal face.

"Oh, cut it aout," remonstrated Sile. "Yeou'll make us all sick with yeour senseless slop. If yeou've got an idee it's goin' to be any picnic trouncin' them Barville fellers this arternoon, yeou're away off yeour base."

Chipper's retort was particularly atrocious. "I would not de*base* myself by such a thought," he said.

Harry Hopper let fly a shoe, which Cooper deftly dodged. "You'll be murdered some day if you don't quit it," declared Harry.

"It wouldn't be murder," said Chub Tuttle, carelessly spilling peanuts from his pocket as he flung his coat aside; "it would be a noble deed for the general public good. No jury would ever convict a feller for killing Coop in a frenzied moment, following one of his alleged witticisms."

"The assassin sure would escape on the plea of temporary insanity," laughed Rodney Grant.

"I tell yeou, fellers, we've got to play some if we trim Barville," said Crane. "I've got it straight from Len Roberts that they're goin' to chaw us up."

"In the name of a good old English poet, let them Chaucer," snickered Cooper, flinging himself into a defensive attitude. "Come on, you base scoundrels; I defy you."

"Roberts is a big wind-bag," was the opinion

of Jack Nelson. "He's always blowing about what Barville is going to do."

"But they've got a coach," said Crane. "Last year we had one, but this season, without Roger Eliot to raise the spondulicks, we couldn't git one. They've got some new players, too, that are said to be rippers. I tell yeou, boys, I'm worried."

"It's just as bad to worry as it is to be overconfident," said Ben Stone, the captain of the eleven, appearing among them. "It's my opinion they've been trying to get our goat by setting afloat a lot of hot air about the strength of their team and their wonderful new players. If we go onto the field feeling a bit shy of them, which is doubtless what they want, they will try to get the jump on us at the start. But we're not going to let them work that trick. Has anyone seen Sage? I wonder where he is."

Fred Sage, who was usually one of the first to be on hand, had not arrived, and when, a short time later, he still remained absent, the captain's wonderment took on a touch of anxiety.

"Here, Hooker," he called to Roy, who, as a substitute, was getting into his armor, "do you

know anything about Sage? He isn't around."

"I've been wondering where he was," confessed Hooker. "I haven't seen him since I left him in front of his house this forenoon."

"Perhaps," suggested Jack Nelson maliciously, "he's suffering from an attack of indigestion. Wild duck is pretty heavy food, you know."

"Look out," retorted Roy, "that you don't have to eat crow yet."

Another five minutes passing, and the quarterback failing to arrive, Stone decided to send out for him.

"Here, Tommy," he called to Tommy Shea, the mascot of the team, "you go find Sage and tell him to get a move on. We must have our regular warming up before the game, and I'll guarantee Barville is on the field now. I can't see what's happened to keep him away. Stir yourself, Tommy."

As the little fellow dusted out of the gymnasium there came through the momentarily opened door the sound of a hearty Barville cheer, which, doubtless, proclaimed the advent of the visitors on the adjacent field.

"They must have plenty of confidence in their team," said Bob Collins, "for they've certainly sent over a big bunch of rooters. People have been coming from Barville in all sorts of turnouts for the past two hours."

"All the more gate money for us," exulted the optimistic Cooper. "In fancy I can hear the merry jingle of their quarters. They can give us as many as they please, but we'll give them no quarter to-day. Nevertheless, without Sage we'd be a quarter short, and we'd feel it before the end of the first half. Mercy! I surrender! Spare me!"

No one paid the slightest attention to him, however, which led him disgustedly to mutter something about casting pearls before swine.

In a short time Tommy Shea returned, followed closely by Sage, whose face was flushed and who betrayed some tokens of unusual excitement. At least, this was what the watchful Piper thought, and he became, if possible, more watchful than ever.

"Met him on the way, captain," the mascot reported to Stone.

"You're late, Fred," said Ben sharply. "We're ready to go out now, all but you. Anything the matter?"

"No—no, nothing the matter," was the somewhat faltering answer, as Sage began ripping off his clothes, having given Tommy Shea the key to open his locker. "I had—some things to do at home, and I didn't—I didn't realize it was so late."

"Lame excuse," whispered Piper to himself. "Something has happened, sure. He's in a perfect stew."

While Fred was hurriedly preparing for the field, Stone called the others around him and talked to them earnestly, laying out a plan of campaign for the first quarter. At first he addressed them all in a general way, after which he singled out individual members of the eleven and gave each one advice and instructions. Ere he had gone through the list Sage was completely dressed for the game and apparently drinking in the captain's words, although to Piper it seemed that he listened with a distinct effort which betrayed a tendency of his mind to wander.

"Just a word to you, Sage," said Stone in conclusion. "Keep things moving on the jump. Don't waste any time over your signals when we're on the offensive. I have an idea that Barville will try to rush us off our feet at the start, and we mustn't let them do that. We'll hammer them hard as we can with straight football to begin with, and hold back our trick plays for use in emergencies. Of course if we quickly get within striking distance of their goal, and they hold us for a down that doesn't give us a proper gain, you may see fit to try a trick or to work the forward pass. Now come on, everybody; let's go out with a snap and show that we're alive."

From the gymnasium to the players' entrance of the field was only a short distance, and Ben led his sturdy followers at a swift pace. The visitors were practicing at one end of the field, watched and encouraged by the surprisingly large gathering of Barville supporters who had followed them to Oakdale. As the shocky-haired locals dashed out into the open space they were given a lusty cheer by the majority of the assembled spectators. At once two footballs were

put into use by them, and they went at the work of warming up with commendable method and ginger.

It was a hazy autumn afternoon, the sky being overcast with a filmy veil, through which the sun shone with a muffled orange glow. A tempered southwest wind was blowing steadily, but not with sufficient vigor to give much advantage to the defenders of the western goal. For the spectators on the seats, light outer wraps were needed, even though the air was not crisp enough to make first-class football weather.

With their coach watching them closely, the Barville lads were making an impression by their snappy practice, in which short dashes, every man starting fast and running low, seemed to be a particular feature.

Stone took this in at a glance, even while he did not appear to give the rival team as much as momentary attention. It was a reminder, however, that for the past week he had striven constantly to drill into the heads of his teammates the necessity for rapidity in both assault and

defence, and the advantage of hitting the opposing line low and hard.

Among the followers of professional sports there can be no such genuine loyalty and enthusiasm as that shown by the adherents of school and college teams; for, as a class, the supporters of such teams are, like the players, heart and soul in the game. In most cases the contestants they are backing and on whom they pin their hopes are known to them personally, which fact establishes between them such friendly personal relations as seldom exist between masses of spectators and professionals; and always a well-earned victory is a thing to be rejoiced over by the satisfied supporter of the triumphant team, like a piece of personal good fortune.

The referee for this game came from Clearport, and was equally acceptable and satisfactory to both teams, having demonstrated in other contests his absolute impartiality and fairness. At the proper moment he walked briskly out upon the field and held a low-spoken consultation with the two captains. A coin was tossed, and, Oak-

dale obtaining the choice, Ben took the western goal.

The cheering of the spectators sank to a murmur, and was followed by a few tense moments of silence as the youthful gladiators spread out over the outlined chalk marks and made ready for the kick-off. Barville had been given the ball, and the referee placed it carefully upon a little soft mound of earth formed by his own hands at the exact center of the field. A short distance away Copley, the fullback, who was to make the kick, balanced and steadied himself, his eyes fastened on the huge yellow egg. The referee retreated; the whistle sounded. With tensed muscles, the players crouched a bit, ready for the dash.

Copley advanced, quickening his steps. With perfect judgment, he came into position with the proper stride, swung his lusty right leg with vigor, and, following the plunk of his foot against the ball, the pigskin went sailing and soaring far into Oakdale's territory.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FIRST QUARTER.

Warren and Forest, the Barville ends, raced along in a desperate dash, closing in as the ball began to fall. Rodney Grant was waiting for the oncoming pigskin, balanced ready for action, his arms outstretched. He made a clean, fair catch, and was off like a broncho of his native state, quirt-stung and spur-jabbed. On one side Warren was blocked off, but on the other Forest came in like a charging fury and flung himself at the Texan. Down they went on the thirty-yard line, with the other players converging toward that spot.

Remembering Stone's admonition to hustle and line up without loss of a moment, the Oakdale boys strained every nerve to get quickly into position for the first scrimmage. This was their opportunity to show Barville right off the reel what real snappy aggression meant.

"Lively! lively!" urged Stone; and, ere the line of the locals seemed fully formed, Sage began barking the signal. He spat out the numbers sharply, every one clear and distinct, and Oakdale went into Barville like a whirlwind before the visitors were fully set for defence. The result was a gain of eighteen yards, made in a style which seemed to carry the Barville boys completely off their feet, with the exception of the sturdy fullback, Copley, who yanked down the runner and prevented what had promised to be a clean break through the defence, and what might have given the man with the pigskin a running chance to score.

The home crowd went wild over this apparently demoralizing attack of the Oakdale boys, and there were many who, forming a hasty judgment, declared their conviction that the locals outclassed the visitors.

Sanger, who knew Stone as a rather slow and methodical chap, had not imagined for a moment that the Oakdale captain would spur his team to a point of such rapid aggression. The Barville leader, however, was not slow to grasp the fact

that he had made an error in judgment, and his voice was heard calling sharply to his somewhat disorganized men as he ordered them to get into position to stop the next charge. Copley came up somewhat dazed by the shock of the collision with the runner; but the latter was even more dazed, and was so long about finding his place in the formation that Barville was given sufficient time to make ready for defence.

Three stingy yards were all Oakdale could make on another line plunge; and when, following this, a round-the-end run promised more satisfactory results, the argus-eyed referee dismayed the shrieking adherents of the team by penalizing the locals for holding.

Barville took heart at once and fought Oakdale tooth and nail, until the latter team was compelled to kick rather than take the chance of losing the ball on downs. Stone, who had a lusty leg, booted the pigskin into the enemy's territory, where Larry Groove, the left halfback, scooped it on the jump, dodged Hopper, and came all the way back to the center line before he was slammed to the turf. Of course this gave the

Barville crowd its chance to cheer madly, and their cries mingled with the Oakdale plaudits for the tackler.

"Ginger up! ginger up!" Lee Sanger was calling, as he crouched behind Bart Rock, the center. "Signal! signal!" Then he reeled off a few sharp numbers, and the youthful contestants leaped at one another like tigers.

Again and again they crashed together, but Oakdale stubbornly held its ground until an unexpected fluke—a bad pass and a muff—gave Sage a splendid opportunity. The ball came bounding to his very feet, with Rollins and Tuttle blocking off two of the enemy, the only ones who seemed to realize just what had happened, and Fred had time to scoop the ball up and a fine chance to get away with it for a run.

Instead of doing so, Sage stared for a moment at the pigskin, as if he did not realize what it was. And when he awoke from this brief spell of numbness and started into life and action, it was Nelson who flung himself on the oval, to be pinned down by Hope, who had finally bucked Tuttle aside.

In this manner, through the faltering of Sage, Barville, although she lost the ball, stopped what might have been a gain of ground by the locals.

Piper, who seemed to see everything, saw this, although he was too far away at the time of the fumble to get his hands on the pigskin. Sleuth glared at Sage.

"Something wrong," he panted to himself. "First time he ever did a thing like that."

"Wake up! wake up!" Stone was calling sharply. "Positions! Get ready! Come on, Sage, give us the signal."

"Signal!" said Sage, and then he paused, as if collecting his thoughts. "Signal!" he repeated. "5—11—16—24."

It was the former line-bucking play, which, through experience thus quickly obtained, Barville was ready to meet. Instead of a gain, the result was a loss of two yards, the visitors actually bearing the line of the home team back.

As the tangled mass of men untwined, following the blast of the whistle, Sage heard Stone calling in his ear:

"Vary it, Fred. Something else; something else, quick!"

The quarterback gave himself a shake. The men were hopping into the line-up, and the Barvilleites, now equally alert and ready, were planting themselves for defence. Straight old-fashioned line bucking, with no varying plays, had already become ineffective, and Sage gave the signal for the double pass and the criss-cross. The ball went to Nelson, who shot toward the right, Grant closing in as if to support him, but passing across his very heels and taking the pigskin as he passed. Cooper blocked the right end off. Piper put his body into the right tackle and bore him in the opposite direction. A hole was opened at precisely the proper moment, and through it went the Texan at full speed.

The main body of the enemy's back field had been led into starting in the wrong direction. The right halfback, who was one of these, saw through the play a moment too late to reach Grant. The fullback, however, came charging across, forcing Rodney out toward the side line. It seemed that the Texan would be run out of

bounds, but ten feet from the border of the field he deceived the charging fullback by a sudden half-pivoting swerve, and the would-be tackler's fingers barely scraped his canvas jacket as he shot by.

The crowd rose and roared, for Grant was flying over the chalk marks with giant strides, followed by the players of both teams. Head thrown back, nostrils expanded, Rodney covered the ground as if his very life depended on it.

"Touchdown!" howled the excited Oakdale spectators. "Touchdown! touchdown!"

There was no preventing it. Over the Barville goal line went Grant, planting the ball favorably for a goal. He did not seem to hear the school cheer, which, with his name tagged at the end, came rolling across the field. His manner was grim and businesslike; his attention was entirely centered upon the matter in hand.

There was no need to punt the ball out. Brought forth properly by the referee, it gave Oakdale a most favorable chance to boot it over the bar, and Stone performed the trick.

As the teams changed positions on the field,

the Oakdale captain found time to rest his hand for a moment on the shoulder of Sage and speak a few low, hasty words to him. In response Fred nodded.

Soon they were at it again, but Barville, apparently nothing disheartened, resumed the struggle more fiercely and grimly than ever. The tide of battle ebbed and flowed, neither side gaining any great advantage, until presently a long, shrill blast of the whistle announced the end of the first scrimmage.

As the boys jogged off the field, Chipper Cooper gave Piper a slap on the back, crying:

"Well, we put one across on 'em all right."

"Yes," nodded Sleuth; "but Sage lost an opportunity for us before that. He isn't right today. There's something the matter with him, or I'm a dunce."

CHAPTER XV.

THE PLAYER WHO BLUNDERED.

The elation of the Oakdale players over making a touchdown and goal in the first quarter was quickly subdued by their captain, who, in the privacy of the gym, sternly informed them that they should have done much better.

"It was a lucky stab, nothing less," said Ben. "Only for the resourcefulness and speed of Grant, they would have held us scoreless. We threw away fine opportunities, one splendid chance in particular; and, although we got the start on them to begin with, we made nothing by it. Unless we do better, we'll be outplayed in the next quarter, mark what I say."

After this bit of general talk, he selected several of the players for special advice and criticism. Lastly he spoke to the quarterback, whose eyes, although fixed on Stone, held a far-away look, which seemed to indicate lack of attention.

"Sage," said Ben sharply, "Sage, listen to me."

"Yes, sir," said Fred, with a start.

"Several times you were woefully slow with your signals, and you know that the swift aggression of a team depends mainly upon the quarterback. No matter how prompt and ready the players may be, they can't play fast when a quarter dawdles over his signals. It's not like you to be slow, and I fail to understand it. You missed a fine chance to take advantage of a Barville fumble, and, only for Nelson, those chaps would have obtained possession of the ball after losing it on a bungling pass and letting it bound to your very feet. Are you sick?"

Fred's face was crimson. "No, sir, I'm not sick," he answered. "I'm all right."

"Then it's up to you to get into the game and play as if you were all right."

"I will, depend on it," promised the quarterback.

Before the boys returned to the field Roy Hooker found an opportunity to speak privately with his friend.

"Get a brace on, Fred—get a brace on," urged

Roy. "If you don't, they'll blame it on our little outing last night. I never saw you so punk before. Your wits seem to be wool-gathering."

"I guess that's right," acknowledged Fred regretfully. "I'll get into gear now. Watch me."

"Has anything happened to worry you?"

"Nun-no," faltered Sage, "not a thing." But, somehow, Roy felt that his chum had not spoken the truth.

The second quarter opened quite as fiercely as the first, but with Barville plainly prepared for quick, savage work and ready to contribute her part of it. Indeed, the visitors seemed the more aggressive, even though Oakdale improved all the opportunities that were offered; and, presently, after some eight minutes of play, the home team found itself making a desperate defence on its own thirty-yard line. Right there, after a first down had yielded no gain, Barville tried the forward pass and executed it successfully, cutting down the distance to the home team's goal by fully one half.

"Hold them, boys—you've got to hold them!" was the cry from the Oakdale crowd.

"Got 'em going!" came from the visiting spectators. "Keep it up, boys! Put the ball over for a touchdown! You can do it!"

Barville had found a weak spot in Oakdale's line, and, mercilessly buffeted and battered, Bob Collins, the left guard, showed signs of grogginess. With only fifteen yards to gain, the visitors followed the forward pass with another assault on Collins, which, although they made only a slight gain, left him groaning on the ground. Promptly attended by a doctor, Collins pluckily tried to stand on his pins and resume his place in the line; but the moment he was released by supporting hands he staggered, being prevented from falling only by the quickness of Nelson in catching him.

Stone saw that Collins could not continue and ordered him to the side line, at the same time calling for Hooker. Surprised that he should be selected from the waiting substitutes, Roy promptly responded.

"Get in there at left guard, Hooker," directed Stone, "and see if you can stop that hole."

Fresh and exultant, Roy took his place in the

line, and, when Barville tried the quality of the substitute, the hole was found to be stopped effectively. Not another foot could the visitors gain through Oakdale's left wing.

Blocked and held, Barville apparently decided to try for a field goal, even though success at that would leave the home team still in the lead. It was Stone, however, who suspected a fake and hurriedly warned his players; and Ben's perception baffled the smashing charge of the visitors, who were held for the final down, thus losing the ball.

Of course no time was lost in booting the pigskin away from that dangerous point.

Nothing daunted over this failure, Barville resumed the battering process, occasionally varying it with an end run or some peculiar piece of strategy of her own concoction. But the locals, stronger on the defence than the offence, refused for the time being to let the enemy regain the lost advantage.

In the last minutes of the quarter, with Oakdale in possession of the ball, Sage once more betrayed surprising slowness and even symptoms

of confusion in giving the signals. This was true to such an extent that finally, in desperation, Stone went in at quarter himself, letting Fred play fullback. And even then Sage was slow about getting into the plays.

The quarter ended with the score unchanged.

In the second period of rest the Oakdale captain drew the quarterback apart from the others and talked to him with great earnestness. Of those who watched the two, Piper took special note of the fact that Sage seemed discouraged and downcast, and it was evident that Stone was seeking by every possible manner of encouragement to brace him up. With Fred at his best, no one else on the team could fill his position nearly as well, and for this reason Ben was extremely loath to make a change.

Collins, having recovered from the gruelling he had received, was anxious to get back into the game, and he made an appeal to Stone the moment Ben finished his talk with Sage. Hooker, however, had done surprisingly well, and the captain told Collins that he would have

wait until, during the course of the play, an opportunity offered for him to return.

The Oakdale boys were now showing few signs of elation, for the second quarter had led them to realize that the two teams were more evenly matched than they had supposed, and that, doubtless, they had been rather lucky in securing six points in the first quarter, to say nothing of their success in holding Barville in check after that.

In the last minute before they returned to the field, Stone called all the players around him and hastily gave them a plan of action. As soon as the ball came into their possession, unless they should chance to get it so close to their own line that a kick would be necessary, they were to line up and attempt a series of three varied plays, without waiting for signals. He was careful to make them all understand precisely what those plays were to be, and in what order they would be carried out. Having made certain that no man misunderstood these directions, he led them back to the gridiron.

It was Barville's kick-off, but Copley's effort

was somewhat weak, and Nelson ran the ball almost to the forty-five yard line before he bit the dirt. This made it especially favorable for the carrying out of Stone's plans, and the Oakdale players lined up, eager to get the start on their antagonists then and there.

Tuttle, with the ball between his feet, took one quick backward glance, and, seeing the others springing into position, prepared to snap it. Just as he was on the point of doing so, he was astounded to hear Sage cry:

"Signal!" Following which, Fred rattled off some numbers which called for a play entirely different from that agreed upon.

A bit confused, Tuttle snapped the ball to Sage, who passed it instantly to Grant. The confusion of the center was likewise felt by every member of the team, which led to faltering and gave the enemy a chance to overwhelm them and bear them back for a loss of more than five yards.

In the midst of the untangling mass Stone reached Sage, grasped him by the shoulder and almost snarled into his ear:

"What's the matter with you? What made you do that? You know we had arranged to work three plays without signals."

"I—I forgot," said Fred. "I'm sorry, but I forgot, captain."

"Well, you messed things finely! It's too late now. Get into action and see if you can make up for the blunder somehow."

Apparently Sage tried hard to atone, and for a time he displayed a return to his best form. His blunder, however, had greatly disturbed the others, and the entire team betrayed such uncertainty and lack of cohesive, united action that the home crowd was dismayed. In a few moments Oakdale was compelled to surrender the ball on a kick.

After this the quarter was heartbreaking in many ways. Twice the visitors threatened Oakdale's goal, and twice they were repulsed. In her turn Oakdale had an opportunity that set her supporters into a frenzy of hope and enthusiasm. An end run that netted thirty yards was followed by a trick play that yielded ten more, and then

came a forward pass which placed the locals within striking distance of the enemy's goal.

Right there Sage once more dashed Oakdale's hopes. The team had two sets of signals. This was necessary to enable them to switch from one set to the other in case their opponents should get wise to the signals in use. Now, however, Sage put them all into confusion by mixing the signals himself in such a manner that it was impossible to tell which of two plays he had called for. Then he made a bad pass, which was followed by a fumble, and Barville, coming through Oakdale like water through a sieve, got the ball.

Immediately Stone ordered Sage out of the game. Nelson was placed at quarter, and his position was filled by a substitute.

CHAPTER XVI.

REMARKABLE BEHAVIOR OF SAGE.

Crestfallen and deeply chagrined, Sage attempted to watch the game from the side line. He gave no heed to the substitutes, who stared at him and muttered among themselves. His face, at first flushed, gradually lost its color until it became almost ghastly and haggard. He saw the exultant, confident Barville team, with the ball in its possession, tearing to pieces the defence of the locals in a manner that promised disaster for Oakdale.

"They'll seek explanations in the next intermission," he whispered to himself. "I can't answer their questions."

Turning suddenly, he left the field. Having passed outside, he made a dash for the gymnasium, in which he began ripping off his sweat-soaked football togs in a manner that was almost frantic. He did not pause for a shower, knowing that there would be no time for it if he

wished to get away before his teammates appeared. Dully he seemed to hear the cheering of the crowd upon the field, taking notice in a benumbed way that the Barville cry was swelling stronger and more triumphant.

Leaving his playing togs as he had dropped them, he dashed bareheaded from the gymnasium, flinging himself into his coat as he ran. Round the corner he darted, scudded down Lake Street until the entrance to the academy yard was reached, ran panting across the yard and settled into a rapid walk when his feet were presently on the path that led across lots between Middle and High Streets.

He had made his escape none too soon, for barely was he out of sight when the third quarter ended and the Oakdale players came hurrying toward the gymnasium. They were a soiled, battered, weary-looking band, and more than one seemed to totter in his stride. In the gym they flung themselves down upon benches and blankets, some even sprawling upon the floor.

'Cripes!" groaned Sile Crane. "Them fellers sartainly made us fight. We barely held 'em."

"If they'd had another minute they'd have scored," sighed Harry Hopper. "They're better trained than we are. They're like iron. That's what a coach does for a team."

Two chaps were rubbing Chipper Cooper's left ankle, which he had wrenched in a scrimmage. The smell of witch hazel and arnica filled the room.

"Look at the confounded thing," snapped Chipper, his face contorted by grimaces of pain. "You can almost see it swell. I'll be as lively as a toad on that bum peg."

"If Sage hadn't messed things up!" muttered Rodney Grant, as if speaking to himself. "What was the matter with him, anyhow?"

"Where is Sage?" asked Stone, looking around. "I don't believe he came in from the field. Here, Shea, go bring Sage."

Piper touched Ben on the arm.

"Don't bother to send for him, captain," he advised.

"Why not?"

"You won't find him out there. He's gone."

"Gone—where? Why——"

"I don't know where," said Sleuth; "but he's gone. Here are his field clothes just as he dropped them. He didn't even stop to put them away."

Astonishment was plainly revealed in Stone's face.

"I don't understand it," he finally said in a low tone. "I can't see why Fred should desert us like this. What will we do if——" He checked himself abruptly.

"He's run away! He's quit!" cried Nelson. "What do you know about that, fellows?"

Hooker rose to the defence of his chum. "I'm dead sure Fred is sick," he said. "There's no other explanation for his actions. He wouldn't acknowledge it, but he must be sick. You all know what a football enthusiast he is, and you never before saw him put up such a numb, bungling game."

"At least," said Stone, "if he had to quit, he might have let me know."

The inexplicable action of Sage seemed to cast a heavier shadow upon the team. Desperately though Stone sought to rally his players, he could

not help feeling that the effort was profitless. They returned to the game in a spiritless, almost sullen humor, which made them, although they fought stubbornly, quite unable to cope with the persistent, determined, undaunted visitors; and, with the opportunity in their grasp, the Barvilleites presently hammered out a touchdown and kicked the tying goal.

Oakdale made a mighty effort to hold the game to a draw, and for a time it seemed that such would be the result. In the very last minute of play, however, getting within the home team's twenty-five yard line, the visitors made a field goal.

As the ball soared over the crossbar a groan of dismay came from the Oakdale spectators.

"That settles it," declared a keenly disappointed man. "Our boys are beaten."

He was right; the game ended with Barville victorious and jubilant.

It was a sore and disgruntled bunch of fellows who took their showers and rubdowns in the gymnasium. With scarcely an exception, they were disposed to place the blame of their

defeat entirely upon Sage. Vainly Hooker tried to defend his friend.

"He ran away without a word," reminded Grant. "There's sure no excuse for that."

"Nary bit," agreed Crane. "He done us a dirty turn to-day, and it'll take a whole lot of explainin' to put him right with the bunch."

Roy was the first to leave the gymnasium, and he started almost at a run for Sage's home.

"I don't understand it myself," he muttered, as he hurried along. "I can't imagine what threw Fred into such a pitiful condition. I hope he can explain."

As he came within view of Fred's home he discovered his chum and Mr. Sage standing near the open stable door, apparently engaged in conversation. At the same moment Fred seemed to espy Roy, and immediately, with a quick word to his father, he darted into the stable and disappeared.

Mr. Sage walked out to meet Hooker. There was a strange expression on the man's face, and Roy fancied that he seemed somewhat nervous and distraught.

"I'd like to see Fred a minute," said Hooker.

"I'm sorry," was the answer, "but he's not feeling well. He can't see you."

His perplexity greatly augmented, Roy stared at the man.

"Is he ill?"

Andrew Sage seemed to hesitate. Lifting a hand to his lips, he coughed behind it.

"Well, not—er—not exactly ill," he answered; "but he isn't feeling well enough to talk with anyone, Roy. I hope you don't mind?"

This treatment from his comrade piqued Hooker. "I didn't suppose," he said, "that Fred would refuse to see me unless he was dangerously ill in bed—and I know he isn't that. It's all right, though. Will you please tell him that Barville won the game?"

Turning, he walked slowly away, his brow knitted with perplexity.

"I can't understand it," he told himself once more. "It's too much for me. He isn't sick, that's sure; and still, his father says that he doesn't feel well. Possibly," he added resentfully, "the information that Barville trimmed us will make him feel better."

CHAPTER XVII.

WORK OF THE YOUNG DETECTIVE.

That evening a group of somewhat doleful-looking boys gathered in front of the Oakdale post-office and shivered as they discussed the game. Without a single dissenting voice they blamed Sage for their failure to win from Barville.

Sleuth Piper appeared, hurried into the post-office and presented himself at the delivery window.

"Look a' the businesslike bustle of the great detective," said Crane, watching Piper through the window. "Anyone would sorter s'pose he expected to receive about a bushel of important mail. I bet he don't get a thing."

"You lose," said Hunk Rollins, as a letter was passed out to Sleuth. "He's got something."

Before opening the letter, Piper was seen eagerly scanning the postmark upon the envelope,

and the watchers fancied there was an expression of mingled excitement and satisfaction upon his face. Coming forth, Sleuth paused in front of a lighted window a short distance from the others and tore his letter open. In a moment he was eagerly intent upon the contents.

"Hi! Who's the girl, Sleuthy?" called Jack Nelson. "Let us read it, will you?"

"'Sh!" sibilated Chub Tuttle, spluttering forth munched peanuts with a hissing sound. "The great detective has a scent."

"Huh!" grunted Cooper, with a forced laugh. "If that's so, he's better off than I am. I bet on the game, and I haven't a cent."

"Look," urged Nelson—"look at Sleuthy's face! He's excited. By Jinks! that letter must be rather interesting."

"I'll get a peep at it," said Harry Hopper. "I'll tell you if it's a girl's writing."

But, although he tiptoed forward with great caution, Sleuth detected his approach, and, having finished reading the letter, hastily folded the missive and thrust it into his pocket.

"Go chase yourself, Mr. Sly Boy," he said,

waving Hopper off. "Rubbering will give you a cramp in the neck sometime."

Roy Hooker, looking decidedly glum, came slouching along, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. Immediately Sleuth pounced upon him.

"Just the man I'm looking for," said Piper, in almost tragic tones.

Roy drew away, seeking to shake Sleuth's hand from his shoulder.

"Well, I'm not looking for you," he retorted. "I've no particular use for you, Piper."

"Come now," said Sleuth, "I wish to hold a private consultation with you on a matter of immense moment."

"Run away and consult with yourself," snapped Roy. "I don't like your company, and you know the reason why."

But Sleuth grabbed at him again as he made a move to pass on.

"Wait," whispered Piper. "Perhaps you'd like to know what was the matter with Sage today? I can tell you."

"The deuce you can!"

"I can," insisted the other boy. "I've solved the mystery."

"Well, if you know what ailed him, why don't you tell? I'm sure I'm not the only one who would like to have the matter cleared up."

"It's not a subject for the public ear, Hooker; it's something to be talked over privately and discreetly between ourselves. If you want to know what I know, you'll just take a little walk with me to some spot where we'll be all by our lonesomes. If you don't want to know, if you haven't got any interest in Sage and his affairs, you needn't bother."

To say the least, Roy's curiosity was aroused.

"I'll wager it will be a waste of time," he said; "but I'll listen. What have you done, concocted some sort of fool deduction about it?"

"I have the straight, solid, indisputable facts right in my inside pocket. I can tell you something about the Sages that will make your hair curl. Where shall we go?"

"You say."

"Down to the bridge. There's not likely to be anybody around there."

It was somewhat chilly upon the bridge which spanned the river below Lake Woodrim, and Hooker's teeth were inclined to chatter as he leaned against the railing and invited his companion to "divulge."

"To begin with," said Piper, "I want to ask you a question, and I hope you'll give me an honest answer. You've been mighty chummy with Sage, and I have a notion that he gave me away by telling you that I was trying to make a ten-strike by capturing a certain criminal for whom a large reward is offered. Am I right, or not?"

"Whatever Fred has told me in confidence, I'll not blow on him. If it was your object to pump me, Piper, you're wasting your time—and mine."

"You don't have to answer," said Sleuth instantly. "Your failure to give me a fair and square reply is sufficient. Sage told you. I knew he would. Well, I don't care. I've got something to tell you now, and, as I said, it will make your hair curl."

He paused impressively, apparently desiring Roy to urge him to go on; but Hooker, shrug-

ging his shoulders a bit, waited the promised revelation.

"I want to ask one more question," said Piper, "and you'll not betray a confidence by giving me an answer. Saturday, one week ago, while out hunting with Sage, you encountered a certain mysterious stranger in the woods beyond Culver's Bridge. You talked with the man face to face and had a fine opportunity to look him over thoroughly. Tell me, did he bear any personal resemblance to your friend, Sage?"

"Huh!" grunted Roy. "Resemblance? What do you mean?"

"Did he look as if he might be a relative?"

"Why, I—I don't know. What in the world are you trying to get at, Pipe?"

"That man professed to know the Sages and made inquiries about them. Nevertheless, at the approach of Fred he ran away, and, although he pretended to you that he was looking for work hereabouts, as far as I can learn he has not attempted to obtain employment, and has not been publicly seen since that day."

"If you have an idea that he was some relative

of the Sages, the mere fact that he has not been seen seems to knock your theory into a cocked hat."

"When I place you in full possession of the facts," returned Piper, in a lofty and superior manner, "you'll perceive that the man's care not to attract public attention strengthens the foundations of my theory. You have not answered my question. Did he look like Fred Sage?"

"In some respects he may have borne a slight resemblance. He had blue eyes, and Fred's eyes are blue. But that's nothing. Come across with your dope that's going to make my hair curl."

"Doesn't it occur to you as very singular that so little is really known about the past history of the Sages? This family, consisting of father, mother and one son, came to Oakdale something like three years ago and settled here. Yet who is there in this town that can tell where they came from and how they happened to come? You're chummy with the before-mentioned son, Hooker. How much has he ever told you about his past?"

"Oh, say, Sleuth, if you're trying to fasten a

dark and terrible past upon Fred Sage, you'll do nothing but make yourself ridiculous. Why, anybody knows that he's been one of the openest, frankest fellows in the world."

"Huh! Is that so?" sneered Piper. "Really, he may appear to be all that you claim, Hooker, but appearances, you should know, are often most deceptive. Mr. Andrew Sage has the bearing of a country gentleman in moderate circumstances. Mrs. Sage is apparently a most estimable lady. These people are regular churchgoers, and have the respect of their townsfolk. Nevertheless, since living here they have never become especially intimate with anyone, and you must admit that they are rather reserved."

"Aw, rot!" exploded Roy in exasperation. "Simply because people don't choose to go about telling everybody their business and all their past history, you get the notion that they must have some guilty secret they are trying to cover up. That comes from reading the kind of trash with which you stuff your mind, Piper."

"In a very few minutes," retorted Sleuth, "I'll make it necessary for you to take back some of

your slurs, Mr. Hooker. You know what country people are. You know that gossip is one of their chief delights. As a rule, let a strange family move into a town like Oakdale, and within thirty days more than fifty per cent of the inhabitants of that place are conversant with the history of those people as far back as it can be traced. When the Sages came here the usual curious gossips attempted to learn things about them. They failed. To me that's a guarantee that the Sages, for good and sufficient reasons, desired to keep their family history from being probed. This thought has occurred to me more than once, and many a time I've told myself that a little investigation of the before-mentioned Sages might prove interesting to a sensational degree. Recently I decided to investigate."

"In other words, you decided to pry into affairs which did not concern you in the least. Poor business, Piper. The fellow who persists in poking his nose into a crack is sure to get it pinched some day."

Not the least ruffled, Sleuth retorted: "The person who puts himself to extreme trouble to

hide his past must have a guilty secret. Sometimes there are wolves in sheep's clothing, and for the public weal they should be exposed. In order to obtain information regarding the Sages, it was necessary to learn where they came from when they moved to this town."

"And you found out?"

"Having decided on a course of action, I never permit anything to baffle me."

"How did you do it?"

"Oh, one day I dropped in on Mrs. Sage for a little social call. Fred wasn't home, so I waited for him; and, while waiting, I made myself comfortable, at the lady's invitation, in the sitting-room. I knew there must be in that house something which would give me the clue I sought. It was not long before I discovered the very thing, a family photograph album. While seemingly amusing myself by looking at the pictures in that album, I slipped several of them from their places and looked for the imprint of the photographer. There were pictures of Mr. and Mrs. Sage, and also of Fred, taken some years ago. Those pictures, I found, bore the name of a photographer

in the town of Rutledge, State of New York. I lost little time in writing a letter to the postmaster of Rutledge, New York, making inquiries concerning the Sages. I asked if they had ever lived in that town. In case they had, I politely requested information concerning the entire family. To insure an answer, I enclosed a stamped and addressed envelope."

"And did you get an answer?"

"Sure," exulted Piper. "I received it to-night. I have it in my pocket now. The information it contains is of the most sensational character. It clears up the mystery of the Sages, and also, I firmly believe, fixes the identity of the mysterious man you met beyond Culver's Bridge."

CHAPTER XVIII.

SLEUTH'S ASTONISHING THEORY.

Curiosity is one of the most powerful traits in human nature, and in youth, being to some extent unrestrained, it often reaches its highest development. It was chiefly curiosity that had led Hooker to listen thus far to the words of Piper; but now, as if suddenly realizing the full significance of Sleuth's self-confessed and shameless prying into the affairs of others, and remembering at the same time his familiar and friendly relations with Fred Sage, Roy suddenly seared his companion with the red-hot iron of contempt and wrath.

"You miserable, sneaking puppy!" he cried. "Under pretence of making a friendly call, you play a miserable trick like that, do you? I've a mind to give you the finest drubbing you ever had."

Indeed, so savage and threatening was his at-

titude that Piper fell back precipitately, lifting his hands as if to ward off a blow.

"Now you hold on!" he cried. "You hold on, Hooker! You hadn't better hit me. Perhaps you think that would be a good way to make me keep still about what I know concerning the Sages. I'm not going to blow this thing round to everybody. I chose you because you're Fred's chum."

"Oh, is that so?" scoffed Roy incredulously. "You've begun blabbing with me, and it isn't likely you'll stop there. I don't know what you've found out, but I do know that the way you've gone about it to obtain your information was dirty—just plain dirty."

"It was thoroughly legitimate," asserted Sleuth in self-defence. "These people are living here in our town and associating with our citizens. If they're the right sort, there can be no harm in finding out about their past history. But perhaps you've misunderstood me, Hooker. I'm not making the claim that there's anything wrong with the Sages we know."

"Oh, aren't you?" said Roy in surprise. "I

thought you were. If you haven't found out that there's something wrong about them, what the dickens *have* you found out that was so wonderful? What is this sensational thing that's going to make my hair curl?"

"If you'll give me a chance and not get fighting mad over it, I'll tell you. You know it's often the case that there's a black sheep in the most respectable family."

"Huh! There are only three persons in this particular family. Where's the black sheep?"

"Only three of the family are known at the present time to the people of Oakdale," Piper said hastily. "Have you never thought that there might be at least one other member of this family?"

"Can't say such a thought ever occurred to me."

"Listen," urged Sleuth, "and keep your temper under check until I'm through. The information I've obtained does not reflect upon Andrew Sage, his wife or his son Fred."

"Well," breathed Roy in relief, "there's con-

siderable satisfaction to be derived from that statement."

"The postmaster of Rutledge states that Mr. and Mrs. Sage and their younger son, Fred, are most estimable people."

"Whew!" whistled Hooker. "Their younger son, eh? Oh, do you mean that there's another —another son we don't know anything about?"

"There's another son, of whom we've known nothing whatever up to the present date. I know something about him now, and he's the black sheep. It was the criminal act of this elder son, Clarence Sage, that doubtless added many gray hairs to his mother's head and led the family, weighted by the shame of it, to leave Rutledge and seek another home, where no one would know of their disgrace. Now if you don't care to hear any more about the matter," said Sleuth craftily, "I'll close up."

Roy's aversion to hearing the information Piper had secured was completely swept away.

"Oh, go on," he invited, once more leaning against the bridge rail. "What did this Clarence Sage do?"

"Robbed a bank."

"In Rutledge?"

"Yes. He was employed in a bank there, and he pilfered fourteen thousand dollars from the institution."

"Jove!" muttered Hooker. "I don't wonder Fred never has mentioned his brother."

"The crime was discovered, as such things always are, and Clarence Sage was arrested, tried, convicted and sent to Sing Sing for a term of years."

"My hair curls!" exclaimed Roy. "So Fred has a brother in prison. That's a shame!"

"He *had* a brother in prison. Clarence Sage isn't there now."

"Oh, his term has expired?"

"No."

"Was he pardoned?"

"No."

"Cæsar's ghost! What happened then? Is he dead?"

"Well," answered Sleuth, "in my mind, at least, there is a doubt at this point. He is supposed to be dead. With two other prisoners, he

broke out of Sing Sing in midwinter and tried to escape by crossing the Hudson on the ice. The other two convicts were both recaptured. The trio had separated immediately after getting out of the prison, and neither of the recaptured rascals knew what had become of Clarence Sage. For more than two months detectives sought everywhere for Sage, whose apparent success in avoiding them was both astonishing and perplexing. Eventually the body of a man was recovered from the river, but in such a condition that identification was difficult. There were reasons, however, to believe that the body was that of Clarence Sage. Andrew Sage viewed the remains and decided that it was his recreant son. The body was buried in Rutledge, and the grave is marked by a stone bearing the name of Clarence Sage."

"Well, then, why do you doubt that he's dead?"

Piper tapped his forehead. "I believe I've got a little gray matter up here," he said boastfully. "After reading this letter, it took about thirty seconds for me to form a theory in which I have the utmost confidence. My conviction is that

Clarence Sage is still alive. I think he did make good his escape and succeeded handsomely in baffling the officers who tried to follow him. The body that was taken from the river and buried under the name of Clarence Sage was that of some other man, as yet unknown. Perhaps it will continue to be unknown. When this identification and burial had taken place, danger for the escaped man was reduced to a minimum. Mind you, I'm not making the assertion that Andrew Sage knew the body was not that of his son, but what would be more natural than for him to identify it as such in order to give Clarence a better chance for freedom? Perhaps, at the time, he really believed it to be the unfortunate young man. Possibly, through some means, he has since learned that his son is alive."

"If you hadn't read so much detective stuff, such an improbable idea could not have found lodgment in your crazy garret," said Hooker. "I understand you've even tried to write stories yourself lately. Say, Sleuth, if this matter wasn't so serious, it would be laughable."

"Your words," returned Piper, "betray the

narrow limits of your reasoning faculties. I'm not basing my suspicions on mere guesswork, Hooker."

"Then, for the love of Mike, what do you base them on?"

"One week ago you met a stranger who behaved in a most peculiar manner. Apparently of some education and refinement, this man seemed to be somewhere near the age of Clarence Sage, if Sage still lives. He made inquiries of you concerning the Sages in Oakdale, and when he learned that Fred Sage was approaching he took to his heels and got away. He didn't dare remain to face Fred in your presence. Why, Hooker—why? Simply because he knew that in his amazement Fred would call him by name and give the whole thing away. What do you think about that?"

For a moment or two Roy shook his head. "I don't believe it. It can't be true, Piper. If that's all you have to base your belief on——"

"Did there seem to be anything especially wrong with Fred last night?"

"No, not that I observed."

"Well, there surely was something the matter with him to-day. Something had happened to upset him completely."

"What do you think it was?"

"It was something tremendous, or it never would have led him to bungle and blunder the way he did in that game. It was such a tremendous thing that he could not get it out of his mind so that he might concentrate on the game. Whenever he dismissed thoughts of it, he played in something like his usual form for a few minutes, but it kept coming back at him and putting him on the blink. He denied that he was sick. He denied that anything had happened to upset him. All this is precisely what would have happened had he made the amazing discovery to-day that his brother Clarence was alive."

"Gee whiz!" breathed Hooker. "I'll own up that you've got me staggered. If you're right, Piper, you certainly have got a head on your shoulders."

The darkness masked the smile of satisfaction that Sleuth could not repress.

"You can't dodge the force of my deductions,"

he declared. "Let me give you a further illustration of my reasoning ability. As an escaped convict, is it likely that Clarence Sage would lead an honest life? I admit that he might, but the germ of dishonesty must have been virulent in his blood, or he, the apparently promising son of highly respectable parents, would never have committed his first crime. Once a man has taken a crooked step, he's almost sure to take others. Supposed to be dead, Sage surely traveled under a fictitious name. A certain crook, called James Wilson and known among his pals as Gentleman Jim, bears a strong resemblance to the young bank-looter who was sent to Sing Sing. This crook was arrested in the town of Harpersville a short time ago, but made his escape from the jail, nearly killing the guard as he did so. A big reward has been offered for Wilson's capture. The last peg in my argument is that this Gentleman Jim is none other than Clarence Sage himself."

"If that should prove to be right," said Hooker, "I'll admit that you've got all the detectives of real life or fiction beaten to a froth."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE NIGHT ALARM.

On Sunday night, or, rather, Monday morning, within a few minutes of the hour of three (Captain Aaron Quinn afterward swore it was at six bells precisely) occurred the explosion which, although muffled and faintly heard by two persons only, was of sufficient importance to shake Oakdale village to its very foundations. The only person actually to hear the explosion, besides the old sailor, who could not sleep well on account of his rheumatism, was Jonas Sylvester, the fat and pompous village night-watch. With the establishment of the bank the town authorities had decided that a night guard must be employed to patrol the streets, and Sylvester, whose qualifications may be summed up briefly by the statement that he weighed nearly three hundred pounds and had no regular employment, was chosen for the job.

With his greatcoat brass-buttoned tightly to the chin, Officer Sylvester had paused at the end of Main Street bridge, the southern limit of his beat, and was stamping his feet and thumping his mittened hands together when, as he stated later, he heard something like the closing of a distant heavy door, which seemed accompanied by a slight shock or jarring of the ground. Wondering vaguely what it was, and recalling that he had heard that earthquakes, however slight, almost always manifested themselves by several recurring detonations, Jonas ceased stamping and thumping and stood quite still in the muffling darkness, his lips parted as he listened.

"Hokey!" he muttered presently. "What was it? 'Twasn't thunder, for it's out of season, and I'm too fur away to hear a horse kicking up in the livery stable. The bank——"

Immediately he started puffingly up the street toward the new bank building.

The clock in the steeple of the Methodist church struck three.

In the meantime, Captain Quinn had been further aroused by his monkey. Chattering ex-

citedly, the creature leaped upon the old sailor's breast and began tweaking at his hair.

"Quit it, ye swab!" rasped the old salt, thrusting the monkey away. "Back to the fo'cas'le, you imp of mischief. Leave me alone, you scrub, or I'll give you a douse of bilge-water."

But Jocko refused to be repulsed by his irascible master. His chattering rose to a squeaking shriek as he returned with a bound and gave a distressing tug at the captain's whiskers.

"Keelhaul me!" roared Quinn, struggling up and casting the animal to the floor. "I'll throw you into the hold and keep you under the hatches for the rest of the voyage if you try it again, you spawn!"

Even though he now kept beyond his master's reach, the monkey persisted in such a chattering uproar and dashed about the dark room in such a frantic manner that the wondering man, groaning at the necessity, hoisted himself out of bed, struck a match and looked at the brass-bound ship's clock which hung near at hand upon the wall.

"There's something the matter," decided

Quinn, dropping the burning match as the flame threatened to scorch his fingers. Then, forgetting that he was undressed, from force of habit he placed his bare foot upon the match to extinguish it.

The racket made by the monkey was nothing in comparison to the roar that broke from the lips of the now thoroughly awakened man, and had anyone witnessed the tremendous jump which Captain Quinn made he would have fancied the old tar suddenly cured of his rheumatism. The language which burst in a torrent from Quinn's lips was of a decidedly sulphurous nature.

"You imp of the Old Nick!" he bellowed, making a dive and a grab for the elusive monkey. "I'll wring your neck if I get my two hooks on it!"

Jocko, however, bounding over the furniture, skimming the length of a shelf, and seeming to swing himself along one of the bare walls of the room, perched on a window ledge beyond immediate reach. If possible, Captain Quinn was

further aroused and enraged by barking his shins upon a chair.

"Furies!" he breathed. "Where's my gun? I'll blow a porthole in the hide of that infernal pest!"

As if realizing the peril to his very life, Jocko yanked away a mass of old rags which had completely filled the opening left by a broken window-pane, and darted through the aperture.

At about this moment Officer Sylvester, hastily approaching the front of the bank, fancied he saw a dark figure dart around a corner of the building and disappear. Shivering, more from excitement and exertion than from the cold, the night-watch pursued that shadowy figure, weapon in hand. At the back of the building he paused, hearing the voice of the old sailor raging within the nearby shanty.

"I s'pose it's that old fool that's made the disturbance," muttered Jonas doubtfully. "Still, I kinder thought I saw something."

Producing the electric torch he always carried while on duty, he flashed the light around him, making almost a complete arc of a circle. Sud-

denly the light stopped, bearing full upon an iron-barred window in the rear of the bank building, and there it hung quivering, revealing to Sylvester's bulging eyes a most astounding and disturbing fact.

Three of the bars had been cut completely off and bent outward, and beyond them an entire section of the window glass was missing, leaving an opening large enough to admit the body of a man.

Almost paralyzed by this amazing discovery, Officer Sylvester felt his thick knees growing weak beneath him.

"Robbers," he gasped—"robbers, by the jumping jingoes!"

That very instant there was a flash in the near-by shadows, and, with the report of a pistol, a bullet almost grazed the torch in Sylvester's hand.

The night-watch did not hesitate upon the order of his going, but went at once. With a yell of terror he took to his heels, and his wild shout of "Robbers! robbers!" resounded through the main part of the village as he dashed toward the

public square near the post-office. Reaching the square, he increased his efforts to arouse the townspeople by firing his revolver several times into the air.

"Marlin spikes and belaying pins!" spluttered Captain Quinn, still groping for his shotgun. "There's blazes to pay! The monk wasn't such a fool, after all."

Presently, gun in hand, he flung open his door and stood peering into the night. He could hear the courageous night-watch shouting from the square and firing his revolver. But what interested Aaron Quinn far more was the sight of two figures which seemed to drop from the rear window of the bank and run away into the darkness.

"Shades of Neptune!" said Captain Quinn. "It's piracy on the high seas!"

Somewhat tardily, he got into action, lifting the gun and firing into the darkness which had swallowed the fleeing figures.

CHAPTER XX.

IN THE BANK.

Naturally, all this shooting and shouting in the early hours of the morning was sufficient to arouse the villagers. In house after house lights began to gleam, and ere long half-dressed men were running toward the square, where, still lustily bellowing, Jonas Sylvester was seeking with trembling hands to reload his revolver. Hyde, the livery stable keeper, Stickney, the grocer, Lawyer Francis and others surrounded the officer and demanded to know the meaning of it all. Others kept coming from various directions as Jonas told what he had discovered at the rear of the bank and how nearly he had paid for that discovery with his life.

"Robbers," cried the livery man—"robbers in the bank? Why didn't you capture them?"

"Yes," demanded the grocer in a high, quavering falsetto, "why didn't ye nab 'em? What

are you doing here? What do we hire ye for?"

"I tell ye they shot at me," replied Jonas. "They banged right at me, and I couldn't see a soul. They had the advantage. Think of my size. S'pose I was going to stand still and let them pepper me full of bullets?"

"Fellow citizens," said the lawyer, who of them all seemed to retain the most presence of mind, "if there are robbers in the bank they may escape while we stand here wasting time in talk. Lead the way, Sylvester; we're with you."

Thus encouraged, the night-watch took the lead, accompanied by the excited crowd. A few of the more timid ones either held back or hastily returned to their homes to procure weapons. Some expressed doubts, declaring their belief that Oakdale's nocturnal guardian must be mistaken.

But a single glance through the front window of the bank convinced Lawyer Francis that something was wrong there beyond dispute. With a word he called attention to the fact that the light which burned by night in front of the vault had been extinguished.

"Show us that winder," commanded Hyde, pushing Sylvester forward.

"Yes, show us the winder," tremulously urged Stickney, falling back until nearly all of the crowd were ahead of him.

"Git ready for a bloody encounter," warned the night-watch. "They're desperate men, and they'll fight to the last gasp."

"We'll find there are no robbers in the bank now," said the lawyer; "and all this uproar has sent them scampering long before this."

As they were hurrying round to the rear of the building a voice roared at them through the darkness.

"Avast there, you lubbers!" it shouted. "You're too late for action. The scoundrels hoisted anchor and made sail long ago. By this time they're running before the wind under full canvas."

The old sailor came hobbling swiftly toward them, bearing his gun, his cane forgotten for the time being.

"Did you see them, Quinn?" asked Lawyer Francis.

"I did that," was the prompt answer. "I put my lamps on them just as they got under full headway, and I'll swear I hurried them some with a double charge of buckshot."

"You fired at them?"

"Both barrels at once, and it's a mercy if I ain't got a busted shoulder to pay for it. The old gun near kicked my head off, confound it!"

"How many of them were there? How many did you see?"

"It's dungeon dark a'most, but I'm certain sure I saw two, at least."

"Mebbe some of you thought I was lying or a fool," cried Officer Sylvester triumphantly. "Now I guess you'll change your tune. Here's the winder. Just look at it."

The electric torch was again turned on the cut and bended bars, and the group of men pressed forward, staring and exclaiming.

"Which way did the robbers flee, Quinn?" questioned Lawyer Francis, grasping the old sea captain's arm.

"Back that way toward Middle Street," was the answer.

"They must not escape," said the lawyer. "They haven't obtained much of a start. Let every man arm himself and take up the search. Deputy Sheriff Pickle and Constable Hubbard must be notified at once. They must organize posses and scour the country. Will you see to it that this is done, Sylvester?"

"Yes, your honor," assured the night-watch.

At this moment a citizen joined the group and announced that Lucius Timmick, the bank cashier, had arrived and was about to unlock the bank door. This information led Lawyer Francis to hasten back to the front of the building, where, pushing his way through the rapidly increasing crowd, he reached Timmick as the latter finally found his key and inserted it in the lock.

Doubtless fearful of entering, the cashier hesitated a bit even after the key had thrown the bolt.

"I'll accompany you, Mr. Timmick," said the lawyer. "I think you need have no fear of encountering any of the rascals within. They have all fled."

"Thank you, Mr. Francis," said Timmick, his voice husky and not quite under control. "Doubtless you are right, but I think it best that I should have a few reputable citizens with me when I investigate."

"I'm here, Timmick; I'm with you," encouraged Stickney, the grocer, boldly jabbing his way through the crowd with his sharp elbows. "You'll find me ready to back you up if you need assistance." His courage had revived amazingly with the assurance that the robbers had fled.

Rufus Sprague, the jeweler, and Lemuel Hayden, a leading business man, both of whom were directors of the bank, were on hand, and with those four citizens at his back the cashier opened the door. Others who were inclined to crowd in were commanded to stand back, but one there was who, crouching low, slipped in unobserved and congratulated himself over his cleverness as he heard the door relocked. This was Sleuth Piper.

Timmick's hand found the button and turned on the electric lights. Then he opened the door

in the grating-guarded partition, beyond which was located the bank vault.

An odor like that of a burnt explosive pervaded the atmosphere of the place, and increased, if possible, the tingling excitement of the men who pressed after the cashier, eager to learn just what had happened. What they now beheld caused them to gasp with dismay.

A number of full sacks of grain had been placed on the floor in front of the bank vault. This grain had doubtless been brought in the sacks from the old feed mill, a quarter of a mile away; and the full sacks had been skilfully arranged in such a position that the outer door of the vault, blown from its hinges, had fallen upon them. A leather grip stood open upon the floor, and scattered about on all sides could be seen a full set of up-to-date burglar's tools.

"Look," cried Timmick, aghast, pointing with a trembling finger—"look at that, gentlemen! Oh, the scoundrels!"

Outside, the crowd, with noses pressed against the cold plate glass of the big front window,

could see everything, and the sound of their agitated voices reached the ears of those within.

"The bank's been robbed!" cried Stickney. "The critters must have done it in a hurry."

"I don't think it has been robbed," said Lawyer Francis. "The inner door of the vault remains in place. The burglars were detected at their work before they could complete the job."

"Let us hope," said Lemuel Hayden grimly, "that you are right, sir."

"Open that inside door, Timmick—open it!" spluttered Rufus Sprague. "Let's find out if they got anything."

But the cashier shook his head. "I think, gentlemen," he said, "we had better wait until the president arrives. When I open that door I wish to do so in the presence of Mr. Eliot. At any rate, I think it would not be advisable to go ahead beneath the watching eyes of that crowd outside the window. Mr. Stickney, will you draw the shade?"

"Yep, I will," said Stickney, rejoicing with a feeling of high importance over the fact that he was one of those who had obtained admission to

the bank. "Whether the robbers got anything or not, it will be just as well to proceed with our investigation in private."

Hurrying to the window, he drew the shade, greatly to the disappointment of the gathered watchers, some of whom expressed their feelings with considerable emphasis.

There was one person, however, who was not thus deprived of further knowledge of what was taking place within the bank. In the shadows of the patrons' side of the cashier window, Sleuth Piper congratulated himself again.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHAT SLEUTH LEARNED.

The excited chattering of the crowd in front of the bank was broken in upon by the harsh voice of Captain Quinn.

"Ahoy, you blatherskites!" cried the old sailor, appearing upon the edge of the gathering. "Stow that jabber a minute and tell me if you've put your peepers on my monkey. The little whelp has run away, and he'll freeze to death unless I find him. It would break my heart if anything should happen to my monkey."

This statement aroused some laughter and provoked a few jeers.

"Go crawl into your bunk, you old pirate," advised one of the younger men. "It would be a good thing if your monkey did freeze. The town wouldn't miss it—or you, either."

"Take twenty years off my shoulders," snarled the old tar, "and I'd lay you by the heels for that,

you swab! You talk bold and sassy to a man three times your age and crippled with the rheumatics, but I've scrubbed the deck of my vessel with dozens of your kind in my day."

"Everybody knows that, you old man-handler," was the retort. "You've cracked the skull of more than one better man, but the law protected you because you were the master and they were nothing but common sailors. Oh, we know you here in Oakdale."

"Yes, and I know you, the whole common crew of ye. You're brave as dogfish chasing po'gies until you spy a shark, and then you run and hide. What are ye doing here? Why ain't ye off with the men that's trying to run down the burglars? You're afraid. There's not one of ye's got the courage of a squid."

"If you weren't so old," said one of the wrathy listeners, "we'd be handing you a taste of your own high-sea methods before you could say half as much."

"Never mind my age," bellowed Quinn, squaring away. "Come try it, any one of ye or the whole crew together. You'll find it a bit lively

while it lasts, or my name is not Aaron Quinn. Hoist anchor, you blackguards. Up with your sails, and come at me with every stitch set. What's the matter, you lubbers—what's the matter? Why don't you come on? Afraid, eh?—afraid of old Aaron Quinn! A bold lot you are! You can wag your tongues loud and talk bold, but not one of ye has as much gizzard as a chicken. Bah!"

With a derisive gesture, he disdainfully turned his back upon them and slowly moved off into the darkness, seeming deaf to their jeers and catcalls.

A few minutes later Urian Eliot appeared, made his way through the throng that respectfully stepped aside from his path, and was admitted to the bank. The door had not long been closed behind the president when it opened again, for Stickney, the grocer, whose manner as he came out betrayed that he was leaving the place with great reluctance and much against his will.

"How is it, Stickney?" called one of the gathering. "Did the robbers get anything, or were they frightened away?"

"Huh!" grunted the grocer, standing on the steps. "I don't know. They waited for Eliot before they opened the inner door of the vault, and when he came he proposed, as I didn't happen to be a director or some high muckamuck connected with the bank, that I should leave. And I was one who risked his life to follow Timmick into that place, not knowing but we might have to face desperate burglars armed to the very teeth. That's the way they treat a fellow citizen who is ready to shed his blood for them. But what can you expect of men who try to run a bank in these days without a night watchman of their own? That's their idea of economy, perhaps, but it will be a mercy if it hasn't proved expensive economy. They take our money in trust and then fail to give it proper protection. Timmick refused to touch the inner door until Eliot came. Perhaps it was unlocked. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that the bank had been cleaned out of every dollar and every scrap of security it contained. I have an account here myself; seventy-nine dollars balance, too. If there has been a robbery, somebody will have to

make good. They can afford it, men like Eliot and Hayden and the others; but I can't afford to lose it."

His resentment seemed contagious, and there were others who began murmuring about the bank officials. But, for the most part, those who talked loudest had small accounts with the institution or none at all.

"What have they done about catching the scoundrels?" asked Stickney. "They ought to have 'em by this time."

He was told that armed squads were searching for the cracksmen, although there had been no reports of a capture.

"Oh, they'll let 'em get away, I'll guarantee," sneered the grocer. "I was opposed to the hiring of a night-watch by the town. I said it would be an extravagant waste of money, and this night proves I was right."

"Only for him," reminded some one, "the robbers might have finished the job and got off without an alarm being raised. Likely nobody would ever known it till the bank was opened at nine o'clock."

"He might have nabbed 'em, instead of running away and hollering like a loon," asserted Stickney. "He had the chance. If I'd been in his place, I'd potted the whole bunch. Now it's doubtful if any one of 'em is caught. Well, I'm going home to get a little rest before breakfast." Apparently it did not occur to the courageous grocer that he might be of service by joining one of the searching parties.

It was growing light and a curious throng still lingered in front of the bank hoping to learn if a robbery had actually taken place, when the door of the building opened again, and this time Sleuth Piper was thrust forth with such violence that he was saved from sprawling on the sidewalk only by the quick hand of a man who stood on the lower step.

"Hello, Piper," said this man, gazing at him in astonishment. "How did you get in there?"

"'Sh!" hissed Sleuth, pulling away. "Never mind, never mind. In pursuance of my duty, I am liable to be found anywhere. Had they given me a little time, I might have imparted some information of tremendous moment. But let them

go on. Let them work in the dark. They will need me yet."

"Tell us, has the bank been robbed?"

"They are now going over the contents of the vault," was the boy's evasive reply. "I'll not forestall their report by a premature statement."

Some one pulled at his sleeve, and, looking around, he saw Roy Hooker. Willingly he followed Roy, who led the way to the rear of the bank, where at least a dozen men were gathered outside the window by which the robbers had obtained entrance.

"You beat the Dutch, Pipe," said Roy, in a manner bordering on respect. "How the deuce *did* you ever get in there?"

Piper explained, taking to himself abundant credit for quick thought, rapidity of action and amazing cleverness in keeping concealed once he had slipped inside.

"Well, what did you learn, anyhow?" questioned Hooker. "Did you find out anything, or did you waste your time?"

"I never waste my time," retorted Sleuth with dignity. "It was through my natural desire to

learn all that could be learned that I was detected and ejected. At the present moment the officers of the bank are in the directors' room at the rear, going over the securities. There's a door leading from that room into the outside corridor, and, in order to hear and see, I had to open that door. They closed it once, but I opened it again on a crack, and that aroused the suspicions of Rufus Sprague, who stepped out quickly and nabbed me. Then, refusing to listen, they chucked me outside. I was ready to throw a bombshell into their midst, but I'm glad now that I was restrained from action."

"What did you propose to tell them, Sleuth?"

"It was on the tip of my tongue to advise them to look for a certain party known as 'James Wilson,' *alias* 'William Hunt,' *alias* 'Philip Hastings,' *alias* 'Gentleman Jim,' and furthermore and finally, *alias* Clarence Sage."

"Then you fancy——"

"Fancy, Hooker? Nay, sir, this is no case of guesswork; I know what I'm about. Doubtless Sage is as far from Oakdale as his feet could

carry him in the time since the would-be robbers fled."

"The would-be robbers!" echoed Roy. "Then they really didn't get anything?"

"Right there," said Sleuth, "you touch the one point that as yet remains inexplicable to me. The inner door of the vault apparently has not been broken open by the burglars. It was unlocked by Timmick in the presence of Urian Eliot and the directors. They removed cash and securities to that back room for investigation. At first everything seemed undisturbed and they were congratulating themselves, when the discovery was made that a package of securities amounting to twenty thousand dollars was missing."

"Gee!" gasped Hooker. "Then there *was* a robbery. But how can it be possible, if the inner door of the vault had not been opened?"

In the gray light of the morning a wise and significant smile flickered across Piper's face.

"There's but one explanation," he answered. "The men who tried to rob the bank last night did not get those securities. They were stolen at some previous time."

CHAPTER XXII.

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL.

"Gee whiz!" exclaimed Hooker, astonished. "Who stole them?"

"That question," admitted Sleuth, "I'm not ready to answer at present. I'll focus my marvelous discerning intellect upon it after the would-be bank robbers are securely in limbo. I'll guarantee that the posses searching for them are rushing hither and thither without rhyme, reason or system. That's no way to hunt the scoundrels down. Of course they may blunder upon the fugitives by accident, but the trail should be taken up and followed in a scientific manner."

"That's easy enough to talk about," said Roy; "but, without the aid of bloodhounds, how is it to be done?"

"To begin with, we know they fled in this direction, for old Quinn saw them running from the back of the bank and fired at them. They

must have reached Middle Street a short distance away. It was impossible to follow their tracks in the dark, but it's now daylight, and I'm going to try to pick up the trail."

"A fine job you'll do at that," scoffed the other boy. "Even if you should find their tracks, you'd need the skill of an Injun to follow 'em."

"We'll see," said Piper—"we'll see about that. There's a cedar hedge running from Main Street to Willow, and any person who dashed through that hedge at full speed must have left some tokens."

"Let's examine the hedge."

In less than a minute Piper found a place where the branches of the trimmed cedars were bent and broken. He pointed at it exultantly.

"There's where one of them went through," he declared.

"Perhaps it's where some one, hurrying to the bank, came in from the other direction."

"Use your eyes, Hook. The manner in which the cedars are twisted and bent shows that the person who passed through the hedge came from this direction, and he was in a hurry, too. Look

here! What's this, Roy? It's blood—blood on the bushes!"

No wonder Roy's eyes bulged as he beheld the slight bloodstain at which his companion pointed with a triumphant finger.

"Blood!" he muttered. "Why, then——"

"Old Quinn hit one of them, no question about it. There's a wounded bank-breaker fleeing for his life somewhere."

Both lads were now greatly excited, although Sleuth fought hard to maintain such an air of coolness as he fancied would well become a great detective.

"By this trail of blood we'll track him, Hooker," he said. "If we capture one of the rascals, perhaps he will squeal on his pals."

"If *we* capture him!" spluttered Roy. "What are you talking about? Do you think we could do it alone? He's a desperate man, and he'd fight——"

"Are you armed?"

"No."

"Well, I am," said Sleuth, displaying a small revolver. "It's too bad you have no weapon, but,

nevertheless, you may be of great assistance in capturing the man. If you've got nerve enough to stick by me, we'll try to run him down."

"Hadn't we better get others? Do you think we ought to try it alone?"

"If we call for assistance," said Sleuth, "and the man is actually captured, we'll have to share the reward with others. You know there's a large reward offered for the apprehension of the man known as Gentleman Jim, and it's not impossible that the fellow who was winged by Aaron Quinn is Gentleman Jim himself. If we take him, just you and I, we can whack up on that reward money. I'll agree to give you a fair share, providing you stand by me through thick and thin."

"You've certainly got a nerve, Piper, to think of trying such a thing. I don't know about it, myself."

"Oh, well, if you're scared," said Sleuth, with no attempt to suppress his scorn, "I'll go it alone. I thought you had more sand, Hook."

"Well, nobody around here has ever figured that you were running over with sand, yourself,"

was the resentful retort. "I guess I've got as much as you have. Go ahead and see what you can do at this job of trailing."

Forcing their way through the hedge, they reached Middle Street, where for a moment Piper hesitated, as if considering the probable course the fugitive had taken.

"About the time the man got here," he said, "Jonas Sylvester was waking people up by his yells and shouts from the square in front of the post-office. Under such circumstances, fearing to encounter some citizen of the town who had been aroused by Sylvester, the fleeing man would avoid the streets as far as possible. I should say he kept straight across the road here and struck across lots for High Street."

"Guesswork," said Hooker.

"Deduction, reasoning, sound judgment," flung back Sleuth, as he hurried to examine the top rail of the old slat fence upon the northern side of the street; "and here's my proof—a smooch of blood where the man grasped the rail as he vaulted over the fence."

"Jinks!" breathed Roy, gazing at the sanguine mark. "You're right; it's there."

Beyond the fence Piper continued northward, bending forward that he might search the ground with his eyes. Again and again he pointed to frozen blood-drippings upon the grass, and, at Sleuth's heels, Roy felt his pulse throbbing with a touch of the fierce excitement that invariably seizes upon one who hunts fleeing men. For the first time in his life he was beginning to believe that Piper had been underestimated by those who had scoffed at his ambition to become a great detective.

Across High Street and into the neglected, old-fashioned horse sheds at the rear of the Methodist church the two boys followed the trail. In one of those sheds there was a little pool of blood, surrounded by similar drippings, at which Hooker stared in great fascination.

"He stopped here," asserted Sleuth. "Concealed by the darkness, he hid in this shed for some little time. Perhaps he was led to do this through exhaustion caused by the wound. Per-

haps he did so because he heard citizens running down Main Street toward the bank."

"Gee!" said Roy, giving himself a shake. "If he's hurt bad, we're liable to come on him any minute. Why, we might have found him here, and perhaps he'd filled us full of lead. It's ticklish business, Pipe."

"He won't be liable to fight unless cornered, and if we corner him we must get him foul so he can't pot us. Come on; time is precious."

As if the flow from the wound had been partly staunched, the trail now became decidedly more difficult to follow. Nevertheless, Sleuth traced it to upper Main Street, some distance below the home of Urian Eliot. There it again led across the road and into the broad fields beyond. Through the midst of these fields ran a tiny brook, the banks of which were lined by scattering clumps of bushes. Here the brown grass was rather tall, and the boys followed the man's tracks with little difficulty. At the point where the fugitive had started to cross the brook a clay bank some three feet in height had caved beneath his feet.

"He took a tumble here," said Piper. "There's where he got on his pins again. See his tracks, Hook?"

The prints of the man's feet were plainly to be seen, and, it being no more than a foot wide at that point, he had crossed the brook at a stride. On the western side the trail again led northward, and before long the boys paused within plain sight of the house of the Sages.

"Ah! ha!" breathed Sleuth, with an intonation of deep exultation. "Now you can see what he was doing. I'm sorry indeed for our mutual friend, Fred Sage; but duty is duty, and we must not falter."

"It does look as if he made straight for the Sages' place," admitted Roy.

"No question about it," nodded Sleuth, grasping his companion's arm and drawing him back. "Let's preserve proper caution. We might be seen."

"I don't see anyone stirring around the place."

"No, but you can see that the front door of the stable is standing open a bit. That door was not left thus all night long, you can bet on it."

"I suppose they were woke up by the racket."

"But why should they go to the stable? If we locate our man there, Hooker, I'll stay and keep watch while you go for the officers."

"I don't see how we're going to——"

"We'll have to retreat a distance, cross the road out of sight of the house and approach the buildings from the rear. That's the proper trick."

Hooker did not attempt an argument; he left the maneuver to be carried through by Sleuth, whom he continued to follow without proffering advice.

Crouching low when the road was reached, they darted across it, one after the other, circling until they could approach the stable of the Sages from the rear. To their surprise, they perceived that the small back door of the building also stood open. Their nerves taut and tingling, they presently found themselves beside that door, where, with one hand on his pistol and the other upheld as a signal for caution, Piper listened intently.

"Can you hear anything?" whispered Roy.

"No," admitted Sleuth, "nothing that seems significant to me. I'm going to look in. Keep still."

Thrusting his head forward, he peered into the gloomy interior of the building. After a few glances, reaching backward without turning, he beckoned for the other lad to follow, and entered, walking on his toes.

They were in the very center of the stable floor when a sudden stamping and a snort caused them both to leap backward, Piper jerking up the hand in which his nickle-plated revolver quivered tremulously. After a moment he drew a breath of relief, turning a pallid face toward Roy as he explained in a whisper:

"Nothing but their cow in the tie-up yonder."

"Thunder!" sighed Sleuth's companion. "She gave me an awful start. Don't look like we'll find anything here, Pipe."

"Wait. I have a theory into which I've been led by the sight of the open doors, but it's best to proceed carefully and not overlook anything."

Ten seconds later, not five feet from the slightly opened front doors, Piper discovered something that added in no small degree to his

self-esteem. Upon the floor near a small grain box was a pool of blood, and beside that pool he perceived some shreds like ravellings from a torn cloth.

"Our man was here, Hooker," he said.

"*Was* here?" muttered Roy. "Then you think he's gone?"

"I think his injury was bound up right here in this stable while he sat there upon that box. I don't believe he did the work of bandaging the wound himself."

"He must be in the house."

"Don't jump at conclusions. That's the trouble with most people. That's how they lead themselves astray. The fellow came here. He must have been pretty badly used up, too. Somebody tied up his injuries. Isn't it likely they realized the man would be traced by the blood-drippings? And is it likely, in that case, that they would think of trying to hide him here?"

"Why, I don't know——"

"I don't *know,* but I'm using logic, reasoning, horse sense. I saw something as we entered by that open back door which makes me confident

that the fellow continued his flight in that direction. Beyond the orchard, out there, lie the woods to the north of Turkey Hill."

"You think he hit out for those woods, do you?"

"I think so, but unless I can find evidence to confirm my belief we'll not try to follow him haphazard."

They left the stable by the door through which they had entered, and when they were outside Sleuth once more fell to searching the ground with his eyes.

"Tracks!" he muttered. "There were two of them—two of them! And here's the proof that our man was one!"

He picked up a lump of half frozen clay which plainly had fallen from the boot of a man. It was the sort of clay into which the fugitive had slumped when the brook bank gave way beneath his feet.

"You're a wonder, Pipe," declared Roy, his admiration unrestrained at last.

"Spare the compliments," said Sleuth briskly. "We're off again."

The trail led through the orchard, beyond which it was plain enough in the hoarfrost which covered the ground.

"And these tracks weren't made so long ago, either," asserted Piper. "It won't be so easy to follow them after we get into the woods. Too bad."

In truth, it was not an easy matter, and they were proceeding with exasperating slowness when of a sudden Piper whirled and clutched his companion, exclaiming in a hoarse whisper:

"Hark! Some one coming! Get to cover, Hooker—lively!"

Near by was a fallen tree. Sleuth cleared it with a bound, flinging himself down behind the thick trunk. His example was followed by Roy, and there, amid a mass of leaves which the wind had swept into a little hollow, they knelt, peering over the fallen tree.

Barely were they thus hidden when another boy came crashing at a run through some bushes and appeared in full view.

It was Fred Sage!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CAPTURE.

Fred was panting, his clothes were torn, and his manner that of one overwrought with tremendous excitement. He had come from the deeper woods to the north of Turkey Hill, and was plainly hurrying homeward as fast as his feet would carry him.

Crouching behind the fallen tree, the two boys gazed in astonishment at Sage as he passed them. They could hear his panting breath and see his breast heaving, and into the minds of both leaped the strange thought that only for his exertions his face would have been ghastly pale. There was a wild expression in his eyes, like that of a person in great fear.

Hooker remained kneeling, petrified, but Piper partly rose, his lips open, as if he thought of shouting to the running lad. If this was his intention, however, he changed his mind, not ut-

tering as much as a whisper, and stood staring after the hurrying boy, the crashing sounds of whose movements could be heard for some moments following his disappearance. Presently those sounds died out and silence fell upon the woods.

Shaking off his lethargy, Hooker rose. "Well," he breathed, "what have you got to say about that, Pipe?"

Sleuth's forehead was puckered in a momentary frown. Before answering, he climbed to the bole of the tree and stepped down on the other side, Roy following.

"It simply confirms my theory," announced Piper. "Fred is badly scared. Somewhere yonder in these woods he lately parted from his brother, who is wounded and a fugitive from justice. That's quite enough to put Fred's nerves on the blink."

"But why is he running for home that fashion?"

"For one reason, he doesn't wish to be seen here in the woods by anyone searching for the bank robbers. For another reason, he must re-

member that there is a telltale pool of blood on the floor of his father's stable, every trace of which I'll guarantee will soon be removed after Fred gets home."

"I guess you're right," admitted Roy regretfully. "I'm sorry about this business—mighty sorry."

"I, too, am sorry for Sage," nodded Piper; "but in matters like this, where justice and the rights of peaceable citizens are involved, sentiment must be put aside."

"Fred's a good fellow," muttered Hooker. "We've been pretty chummy."

"Of course he's a good fellow; nobody disputes that."

"But to think he has such a brother!"

"That's his misfortune, not his fault."

"And he's trying to help the fellow escape."

"You'd do the same under similar circumstances, so don't condemn him. But while we're gabbing here the fugitive is getting farther away. Of course, if he's badly hurt, as it seems he must be, he can't cover ground as fast as he otherwise might."

"We can't find him in these woods; we might as well give up that idea."

"And give up all hope of copping the reward!" exclaimed Sleuth. "Not I. The slope of Turkey Hill isn't far away, and from it we can get a good view of the swamp and the woods. Perhaps we'll see something of the fellow by climbing up there. Anyhow, it won't take us far out of our course, if we're going to make for that old camp in the swamp, in which I fancy our man, at Fred's suggestion, may try to hide. Don't quit. Come on."

For a short distance Sleuth sought to retrace the trail made by Fred Sage while hurrying homeward, but this was so slow and exasperating that presently he abandoned the effort and made straight for Turkey Hill. There the boys pantingly climbed the first steep slope, soon arriving at a clearing upon the hillside where the timber had been cut away, leaving an expanse of unsightly stumps.

"From this spot," reminded Piper, "Spotty Davis was seen when he shot Berlin Barker's hound. Use your eyes, Hooker. See if you can

discover anyone moving in the woods or the open places down yonder."

For some moments they searched the lower expanse of woods and clearings with their eyes.

"I don't see a thing," muttered Roy presently. "I don't believe we'll be able to——"

"Look at those crows yonder," interrupted Sleuth, flinging out his hand.

Some distance away, near the base of the hill to the westward, a number of crows had suddenly risen into the air, cawing wildly.

"We're not hunting for crows," reminded Hooker.

"I've studied the habits of those birds," asserted the amateur detective, "and I'll guarantee they've been suddenly alarmed by something moving in the woods near by. Hear them cawing? Take it from me, they are shouting in crow language: 'Man! man! Here's a man!'"

"Oh, rot, Piper! You may be pretty wise about some things, but——"

"There he is!" rasped Sleuth, suddenly seizing his companion's arm and pointing with the other

hand. "I saw him—I saw him run across a little opening! He's coming back this way, too!"

"Why—why should he do that?" wondered the bewildered Hooker.

"Because, in all probability, he has discovered a posse of searchers over yonder. He has been compelled to double back on his tracks. We may be able to cut him off if we hustle."

Without waiting to see if Roy followed, Piper ran down across the clearing, dodging hither and thither to avoid the stumps, and plunged once more into the woods, setting a course calculated to intercept the fleeing man. Once more he had drawn his revolver, which he carried in his hand as he ran.

Roy followed instinctively, although it must be confessed that he had little relish for an encounter with a desperate criminal fleeing from man-hunters. Sleuth was buoyed by excitement and a sort of fictitious courage, which, possibly, might desert him in a twinkling when the decisive moment came. On through the woods he darted, turning hither and thither to avoid the denser thickets. His ears told him that Roy was com-

ing, and that was sufficient. Dead branches snapped beneath their flying feet; in places fallen leaves were scattered with a swish and a rustle; once or twice both lads felt their heart-strings tug as they glimpsed black tree trunks, any one of which for a moment might have been mistaken for a man.

Suddenly they burst out into a rocky bit of pasture land, through which ran a deep gully. And there, not thirty rods away, was the man!

Evidently warned by the sounds they had made while running through the woods, he was looking toward them when they appeared, and in every respect his bearing was that of a creature hunted and nearly cornered.

"Stop!" cried Sleuth, lifting the revolver and halting so suddenly that Hooker nearly bumped against him. "Throw up your hands!"

Instead of obeying, the man turned toward the gully and made a desperate attempt to leap across it. Beneath his feet the ground gave way, and the boys saw him disappear with one arm outflung, as if he had fruitlessly clutched at the empty air.

"Jerusalem!" burst from Roy's lips. "He's gone!"

"And if that tumble doesn't bump him some, I'm mistaken," said Sleuth. "We can get him before he recovers."

Nevertheless, he exhibited a certain amount of caution and apprehension as he reached the gully and peered into it.

"He may shoot," called Hooker, holding back discreetly.

"Not he," exulted Sleuth. "Here he is! Come on; we've got him!"

With seeming recklessness, Piper slid down into the gully, still gripping his revolver in his right hand.

"I never thought it of him," said Roy, aghast —"never!"

A moment later, peering downward, he saw the other boy bending over the body of a man who lay amid some rocks at the bottom of the gully.

"Come down," called Piper chokingly, his voice husky and shaking with excitement. "We've got him cold! He was knocked out, stunned by that fall."

Hooker, his courage reviving, descended into the gully, bringing down with him a small mass of loose earth and stones. He found Piper going through the pockets of the unconscious man.

"Here," said Sleuth, passing over an automatic pistol, "take this thing, Hook. We'll render him helpless by disarming him so that he can't do much when he comes round."

"Hadn't—hadn't we better tie his hands behind his back?" faltered Hooker.

"If we have to, we will," assured Sleuth; "but it will be liable to cause him a great deal of suffering. You can see that he was shot in the right arm and shoulder. That's where old Quinn plugged him. His coat sleeve is all bloody. The coat was removed while his wound was bandaged, and his arm is hanging loose inside of it now. Certainly he couldn't run very fast that way. No wonder he didn't get away."

"He isn't—dead—is he?" whispered Roy, staring at the pale face of the unfortunate wretch and noting a little trickle of blood which was running down across the man's temple from a cut higher up in the edge of his scalp.

"Oh, I guess not," answered Piper, with an hysterical little gulp of laughter. "He struck his head on the rocks down here when he fell, and that put him to sleep for fair; but I'll wager he'll come round all right pretty soon. This is a big piece of work for us, Hook, old pal. Five hundred dollars for the capture of Mr. James Wilson, *alias* Gentleman Jim, won't divvy up so bad between us. Eh? What?"

"But is he—is he Gentleman Jim?" muttered Roy, staring at the man's face. "Have we got the right man?"

"The right man?" echoed Piper. "He must be the right one, or Fred Sage never would have tried to help him get away. Isn't he the man you saw and talked with in the woods beyond Culver's Bridge?"

"No, he's not," answered Roy positively.

"Gee!" gasped Sleuth in dismay. "That's queer!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

SUSPICION.

"Not—not the man?" muttered Piper, still staring at the unconscious captive. "Why, he must be the man—he must be! He can't be anybody else."

"He's not the one I talked with," reiterated Hooker. "I never saw him before. That man was larger, taller, better looking."

"Wait a minute," said Sleuth, thrusting his hand into his pocket and bringing out a clipping from a newspaper. "Here's the description of James Wilson. About twenty-six years of age, five feet ten inches in height, weight one hundred and sixty pounds, hair slightly curly, eyes blue, teeth white and even."

"Doesn't come within a thousand miles of fitting this fellow," asserted Hooker. "This man is thirty-five, if he's a minute. He doesn't stand more than five feet seven or eight, and he won't

weigh a pound over one hundred and forty-five. His hair is coarse, black and bristly. Can't see the color of his eyes, but look at those teeth! You'd never call them white and even, would you?"

"I should say not," acknowledged Piper, in a tone of profound regret. "This isn't Gentleman Jim, but it must be one of his pals. Do you realize what that means, Roy?"

"It means that we've caught the wrong bird and won't get our fingers on that reward money," sighed the other boy regretfully.

"It means," said Sleuth grimly, "that Fred Sage was concerned in assisting to escape a member of that gang, to whom he is in no way related. It means that he's an accomplice. There would be an excuse for his aiding his brother, but not for rendering assistance to any other member of the gang. It looks pretty bad for Fred."

"I can't believe it," muttered Roy—"I can't believe he'd make himself the accomplice of criminals."

"I don't want to believe it, but what else are we to believe?"

"I hope he can explain."

"*I* hope he won't have to."

"Look out, Pipe, this fellow is coming round."

The man's breast heaved, and a faint groan issued from his lips, following which his eyelids fluttered a bit and then lifted slowly. He lay there staring dumbly at the two boys, each of whom menaced him with a loaded pistol. For the time being he did not seem to realize what had happened.

"It's no use to try to kick up," Piper stated warningly. "We've got you, and we'll have to plug you if you try any tricks."

Slowly comprehension seemed to creep into the man's brain, and presently he made a weak effort, as if trying to sit up, but fell back with a smothered cry that ended in a groan.

"It's pretty tough," said Piper; "but you'll have to make the best of it, my man. Fellows engaged in your line of business have to take their medicine when they run afoul of calamity. What's your name?"

Until Sleuth had repeated this question three times the man made no attempt to reply. After the third demand he growled falteringly and harshly:

"None of your business."

"Thanks," said Piper. "I guess your picture is in the rogues' gallery somewhere, and your identity will be learned all right when you're placed on trial. We've disarmed you so you can't make any sort of a fight of it, and we're going to take you back to Oakdale. Our great regret is that you're not Gentleman Jim."

The man looked at them queerly. "Who's Gentleman Jim?" he growled.

"Bluff," said Piper—"pure bluff. He's your pal, and, doubtless, the leader of the gang who broke into the Oakdale bank last night and blew open the vault. Poor job, that. It's tough to be pinched without ever having lifted a dollar from that bank."

"You're a wise young brat!" sneered the man.

"Hark!" exclaimed Hooker at this moment, rising quickly to his feet. "I hear voices. It must be some of the searchers."

"I hope so," said Sleuth, who likewise could hear the sound of voices, evidently approaching. "I'll keep this fellow covered, Roy. See who they are."

It proved to be a posse headed by Constable Abel Hubbard. From this armed body of men the captive had fled, having discovered them ahead of him in the woods. Hooker, seeing and recognizing the men, raised a shout that brought them hurrying to the gully, and soon the two boys were vainly trying to answer a score of questions hurled at them promiscuously.

"Well, I swan to man!" spluttered Constable Hubbard when he presently understood the situation. "I swan to man, if these two younkers ain't ketched one of the rascals! That's purty clever work for boys, feller citizens."

With scarcely an exception they agreed that it was, and Sleuth and Roy were showered with congratulations.

"We're rather glad you turned up, constable," said Piper pompously. "It relieves us of the trouble of marching this poor wretch back to the lockup. We'll turn him over to you with the un-

derstanding that we're to receive the reward, in case there's one offered for his apprehension."

After a time the prisoner was lifted to his feet and boosted out of the gully, to be marched away toward town by the rejoicing posse. The shortest route was pursued, which led them down across the fields to the Barville road and thence into Lake Street.

Piper and Hooker followed.

The appearance of the party in the village created a great sensation; but when the citizens were informed that Sleuth and Roy had effected the man's capture, the sensation was even greater. The boys were plied with questions. Hooker felt like running away, but Piper seemed to enjoy it all hugely, and was tireless in describing how the man had been trailed, although, for some reason, to the relief of his companion, he avoided mentioning Fred Sage or speaking of the telltale pool of blood upon the floor of Andrew Sage's stable.

The captive was confined under guard in the village lockup, and a doctor was called to give his injury proper attention.

The boys could not learn that anything further

in connection with the bank robbery had transpired. Several armed posses were still searching in the vicinity of Oakdale, and the surrounding country and towns had been warned by telephoning, which made it seem most improbable that the associates of the captured burglar could escape.

"I'm going home for breakfast," Hooker finally announced.

"I've just discovered that I'm hungry myself," said Sleuth.

At a street corner, having gotten away from the crowd, they paused a moment. Piper, who had borne himself with no small amount of pride beneath the eyes of the townspeople, now betrayed a disposition to be somewhat downcast and gloomy.

"Look here," said Roy, "I took special notice that you didn't mention Fred Sage in connection with the matter. You dodged that, and so I kept still, too."

"I was in hopes you'd follow my lead, Hook. Forgot to warn you until it was too late."

"But what's your idea in shielding Sage, if you think he's guilty?"

"Is he guilty?"

"Why, you know it certainly seems that——"

"It seems so," nodded Piper; "but, still, I can't bring myself to believe that our respected schoolmate and comrade would make himself the accomplice of criminals. I had this thing figured down to a fine point, Roy, but I'm willing to admit that my calculations were decidedly upset. I don't want to make any charges against Fred until I talk with him face to face."

"I'm glad," breathed Roy—"I'm mighty glad of that. I thought you were absolutely positive. I own up it does look queer for Fred, but perhaps he can explain. I'm sure he can. I'll go to him——"

"No, you won't," interrupted Sleuth sharply. "You keep away from him, Hooker. You let me do this. You'd make a mess of it. There are other features of this affair that puzzle me a bit. For instance, there are the missing securities. Queer business that a bank vault which was only partly broken open should be discovered

short to the extent of twenty thousand dollars in negotiable securities."

"Haven't you any theory at all, Sleuth?"

"Only one. As long as I've trusted you this far, I may as well go the limit. Swear silence."

"All right."

"Cross your heart."

"Here goes."

"Then listen," whispered Sleuth, after an unnecessary glance around, as if to make sure no one was within earshot. "I've never had much confidence in that smug, smooth-faced, canting cashier, Timmick. I know Urian Eliot trusts him, but I wouldn't. I thought he acted queer while I was watching him in the bank after the attempted robbery was discovered."

"By Jove!" cried Hooker. "I've always said he was a sneak. I told Sage so myself. You've hit it—I'll bet you've hit it, Sleuth!"

"Not so loud! Cautious! cautious!" warned Piper. "Now don't forget your oath. Don't breathe this suspicion to a soul. If the robbers didn't get those securities last night, and it's a certain fact that they didn't, someone removed

them from the vault at an earlier date. The investigation by the president and the directors led to the discovery that they were gone."

"Timmick did it," said Hooker. "He's the man."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BOY WHO ACTED GUILTY.

The bank officials were perplexed and mystified. With the arrival of Urian Eliot the inner door of the vault had been opened by Timmick. It was evident to them all that the looters had been driven away before they could open this door, and therefore there was every reason to believe that the contents of the vault would be found undisturbed.

In order that a thorough examination might be made in the presence of the president and the others, the cash and securities contained in the various compartments of the vault had been removed and placed upon a long oak table in the adjoining directors' room. This done, the officials gathered about the table and began the investigation, the president, pencil in hand, checking everything off on a list that had been furnished him by Timmick.

Then it was that they were shocked to discover that twenty thousand dollars' worth of negotiable securities could not be found. The suggestion that these securities had been overlooked sent Timmick and one of the directors back to the vault, but without avail. In a few moments the cashier and his companion returned, and Timmick's face was pale and his voice husky as he said:

"Those securities must be here on this table. They're not in the vault. They must be here. They can't be gone."

"We'll go over the list again," said Urian Eliot. "Let's do it slowly, carefully and systematically."

Their great care in this second inspection simply served to confirm the fact that the securities were missing, whereupon Timmick collapsed upon a chair, seemingly on the verge of fainting.

"It's awful—incomprehensible!" he whispered hoarsely, staring at the faces of the other men. "I can't understand it."

"Nor I," snapped the little jeweler, rapping his knuckles sharply on the table and facing the

cashier with a piercing eye. "If you can't explain it, Mr. Timmick, I don't know who can."

"Why—why," faltered the distressed cashier, "I hope—you don't mean, sir——"

"I'm sure Mr. Sprague will not be hasty with an insinuation," interrupted Urian Eliot. "I'm sure we all have the utmost confidence in your integrity, Timmick."

It was noticeable, however, that none of the others said a word in support of this assertion, and Mr. Lucius Timmick looked very ill indeed by the white light of the shaded chandelier.

It was some time after daylight before the officials came forth from the bank and made inquiries concerning the search for the fugitive crooks. Later they learned of the remarkable capture by two boys of the wounded member of the gang, and when the prisoner had been attended by a physician they sought to obtain some information from him by giving him a mild sort of "third degree" treatment. The effort, however, resulted most unsatisfactorily. The prisoner, stretched on a cot in the lockup, grimly de-

fied them and sullenly refused to answer a single question.

"Aw, go on," he growled. "You couldn't make me snitch if you skinned me."

"Your accomplices are certain to be captured," asserted Lemuel Hayden. "They can't get away. It is your opportunity to obtain a little clemency by confessing before any of the others do so."

"Bite it off," advised the prisoner. "You're wasting your wind, old geezer. I never ties up with squealers."

About this time Roy Hooker, crowding down a breakfast rendered tasteless by his excitement, was telling his astounded mother a story that made her gasp and throw up her hands.

"Mercy!" she cried, staring at him. "You caught one of the robbers—you and Billy Piper? I never heard of such a thing! Two boys catching a desperate burglar!"

"We caught him," laughed Roy, "though perhaps it wouldn't have been so easy, only he was pretty weak from his wound and the loss of blood."

"You'll be killed some day, Roy," prophesied

his mother. "Now there's your father; I didn't want him to go out with the men who are hunting the robbers, but he just would go. I'm worried to death for fear he'll get shot or something."

"Wonder what he will say when he hears what Sleuth and I did," chuckled Roy, gulping down a final mouthful and pushing back from the table. "Bet he don't do as much." He rose and grabbed his cap.

"Where are you going now?" asked Mrs. Hooker apprehensively. "I won't be able to rest easy a minute."

"Oh, there's something doing in Oakdale this morning. Only a dead one could hang around home with so much going on. Don't worry, mother; nothing will happen to me. They ought to be marching in some of the other crooks pretty soon, and I want to see 'em when they come."

Outside the house, however, he paused, as if doubtful concerning the course he would pursue, and for some moments he seemed struggling with contending desires.

"Sleuth didn't want me to see Fred," he mut-

tered. "He made me promise I wouldn't tell Sage anything. Fred's my friend. If he's mixed up in this rotten business it's a shame. I'd like to see him a minute; I must see him. I won't give anything away, but I'd like to see how he'll behave. I'm just going up to his house, that's all."

Having arrived at this decision, he hurried up Willow Street, crossing to Main only after the heart of the village had been left behind. As he drew near the home of the Sages his pace slackened somewhat, and he began to realize that he almost dreaded to meet Fred face to face. Even when he had reached the proper point to turn in from the street he hesitated and was almost tempted to retrace his steps.

At that moment, as if he had seen Hooker, Fred came out of the house, and Roy walked into the yard.

"Hello, Hook," said Sage. "What's the latest? Have they caught any of the robbers? My father is down town now."

It seemed rather singular to Hooker that Fred also was not in the village, and, furthermore,

Roy imagined he could perceive something unnatural and distraught in his friend's manner.

"S'pose you've heard about Pipe and me?" said Roy.

"No. I've been staying home with mother. She's nervous. Father deposits at the bank, you know, and he wanted to find out if there had really been a robbery. What about you and Sleuth?"

"We caught one of the gang," announced the visitor proudly.

"You—you did?" faltered Sage, seeming to stiffen a bit. "Really and truly did you and Sleuth catch one of them?"

"Really and truly, old man. We ran him down over behind Turkey Hill and nabbed him. He's in the lockup now."

"Back of Turkey Hill!" said Fred, a bit huskily, and the other boy fancied his face lost color somewhat. "How—how did you do it?"

"Oh, the fellow was wounded, and it wasn't much of a trick. Old Quinn blazed away blindly at the robbers when they ran, and he happened to hit this one. Of course," he continued, with a

pardonable touch of pride, "some folks seem to think we did quite a thing in nabbing him."

"I don't wonder," muttered Fred. "Tell me just how you did it."

With a sudden impulse, Roy strode past his companion, saying: "Come on into the stable and I'll tell you."

"We can talk just as well out here," said Sage hastily. "Let's not go in there."

"But I want to go in there," persisted Hooker, keeping on, although his friend had grasped his arm.

The sliding doors were now nearly closed, but Hooker thrust one of them back sufficiently to enter, and Fred, ceasing to object, followed into the building.

At a glance Roy perceived a large damp spot upon the floor, where upon his previous visit there had been a pool of blood. Every trace of the blood stains was gone. Turning quickly to Sage, Hooker saw that he was being watched narrowly, but instantly Fred's eyelids drooped.

"Sleuth was right in his suspicions, after all," thought the visitor, with sinking heart. "If there

wasn't something wrong, they'd never removed those stains and kept still about it."

"Tell me," urged Fred, "how you happened to find this wounded robber. How did you trace him?"

"I didn't say we traced him."

"No, but I supposed—that is, I imagined you must have been led in some way to search for him over by Turkey Hill."

"He's in it—in it up to the neck," thought Roy, almost bitterly. "It's a shame! He seemed like such a fine fellow!"

"What's the matter?" asked the other lad nervously. "Why don't you tell me all about it?"

"Oh, yes, I—I will. You see, it was this way." He began his story at the point where he and Piper had discovered the fugitive from their position in the clearing on the northern shoulder of the hill. In the midst of the narrative, through which he was hurrying, the boys were startled by the swift tread of feet, and a moment later several persons, led by Constable Hubbard, entered the stable.

"What—what is it?" demanded Fred Sage at

sight of the men. "What are you doing here?"

"We're a-looking for one of them there bank robber critters," answered the constable, "and for sartain reasons we're led to believe he's hiding round these premises somewhere. The buildings are surrounded complete, and he can't git away."

CHAPTER XXVI.

ANOTHER CAPTURE.

Roy Hooker, interrupted in the midst of his narrative by the appearance of the constable and the posse, was not a little startled, but his dismay was nothing compared with that of Fred Sage. For a few moments following the assertion of Abel Hubbard Fred apparently found it impossible to speak, although he made an effort to do so. Recovering his voice presently, he falteringly and huskily cried:

"One of the bank robbers here? It's impossible, Mr. Hubbard! You're certainly mistaken."

"Maybe so," admitted the constable, rolling a quid of tobacco into his plump cheek; "but we'll see about that. I received notice that he was here from a certain young feller that's showed himself rather wise and slick by ketching one of the bunch."

"By which," said a voice, as Sleuth Piper

stepped forward, "the worthy officer refers to me."

"You!" gasped Fred, resentment mingling with his alarm. "You! I might have guessed it! You've got a grudge against me, Piper, and you've made all sorts of trouble for——"

"I positively disclaim any personal animosity," interrupted Sleuth. "I'm simply doing my duty, that the ends of justice may be attained. I will add, Sage, that I'm mighty sorry to see you involved."

Following this statement he turned somewhat savagely upon Hooker, to whose side he quickly stepped.

"You're to blame," he snapped in a low tone. "You forced me into this sooner than I intended."

"*I* did?" muttered Roy, astonished. "How?"

"You broke your pledge to me. You forgot your solemn oath. I suspected that you might, and, fortunately, I had my eyes open. I saw you skin up here to tell Sage, and I lost no time in notifying the constable and getting him to bring an armed party to search these premises."

"I'll bet they don't find anything," said Hooker. "I hope not. If they don't, it will take some of the swelling out of your head."

"Time is val'able," announced Abel Hubbard sagely, "so we'll begin s'arching right away. We'll take the stable fust, and then we'll go through the house. Git at it, boys," he commanded, with a wave of one pudgy hand.

The men started to obey, but before they could really begin the door of the little granary at one side of the stable swung open, and a man stepped out into view.

"If you're looking for me," he said coolly, "you needn't go any further; but let me state right here that I was in no way concerned in that attempted bank robbery."

"Clarence!" gasped Fred Sage.

"The man I met in the woods!" burst from Hooker's lips.

"Gentleman Jim, or I'll eat my hat!" exulted Piper. "Nab him, men! He's desperate! Don't let him play any tricks!"

Immediately the man, who was indeed the mysterious stranger with whom Hooker had

conversed, was covered by several loaded guns and commanded to throw up his hands, an order which he disdainfully obeyed.

"It won't be necessary to shoot," he said. "I sha'n't offer the slightest resistance."

"Keep him kivered," fluttered Constable Hubbard—"keep him kivered till I put the irons on him!"

Producing a set of old-fashioned manacles, the excited constable bunglingly snapped them upon the wrists of the man.

"There!" he breathed in deep satisfaction; "we've got *you,* all right. By golly! that boy Piper is a wonder."

"Constable," said Sleuth, remindingly, "you mustn't forget that it was solely through information supplied by me that Mr. James Wilson, *alias* Gentleman Jim, was captured. I shall lay claims to the reward offered for him."

"I guess you'll git your share of it, if he's the feller you think he is."

"He's nobody of the sort," excitedly asserted Fred Sage. "He's in no way connected with the bank robbers. You're making a dreadful blunder."

"Then what's he doing, hiding here?" questioned Hubbard incredulously. "Mebbe you can explain that."

"Yes, yes," faltered Fred, "perhaps—I can."

"Don't try it," implored the prisoner quickly. "It won't do any good, Fred; they wouldn't believe you. I should have gone away yesterday and saved you all this trouble."

"It's awful," choked young Sage—"awful for you! Oh, what made you come here at all!"

"Simply because I was a fool and couldn't keep away," was the bitter answer.

"This ain't no place to chin it over," said the constable sharply. "It's my business to lodge this here gent in the lockup, and I'm going to do so jest about as quick as I can."

"Wait a minute," pleaded Fred. "My mother doesn't know. She's in the house. Doubtless she's in terror now because of all these armed men around the place. Wait two minutes, until I can go inside and prevent her from looking out of the window when you take Clar—this man away. Won't you do that much, Mr. Hubbard?"

"I don't see no reason why I shouldn't. Go

ahead, young feller, and soothe down your mammy. I'll give ye jest two minutes, and then we'll march this feller off to the caboose."

Flinging a final resentful look at Piper, Fred hurried into the house. Sleuth, preening himself proudly, could not refrain from giving Hooker another jab.

"You did a good thing for yourself, Hook," he sneered. "By going back on me, you cut yourself out of any share in the reward money. We've got the feller who calls himself James Wilson; there's no doubt about that. Furthermore, you must have observed that Fred called him Clarence, which fully confirms my deduction that Clarence Sage is not dead, although an unknown man was buried under that name."

"It looks as if you're right, Pipe," admitted Roy sadly; "but losing a share of the reward don't hurt me half as much as knowing what this means to Fred and his folks."

"Time's up," announced Constable Hubbard, snapping shut the case of his silver watch and dropping it into his pocket. "Come on, Mr. Crook; for'ard, march!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE TWO PRISONERS.

As the key rattled in the lock of the heavily barred door the wounded prisoner looked up from the cot on which he was lying and saw the second captive marched into the room by Constable Hubbard.

"I guess," said the constable, "I can chance it to take the irons off ye while you're in here, for we've got the place guarded by men who would shoot ye quick as they'd spit if you ever did break out, which ain't nohow prob'le."

"Thank you," said the man, as Hubbard removed the handcuffs. "I won't try to break out, I promise you that."

"And I'd be a fool if I took any stock in your promise," said the fat officer, as he backed out of the room, closing and relocking the door.

With a grimace of pain, the wounded man

lifted himself to a sitting posture on the cot. The eyes of the two prisoners met.

"So they nabbed you after all, Thirteen-thirteen," said the first prisoner. "Tough luck, old pal. I told yer to lay low."

The other man shrugged his shoulders. "I did," he answered; "but they surrounded the place and had me pinched, so there was no use trying to make a run for it. If I'd tried that, the chances were a hundred to one that the damage to your wing wouldn't have been a patch compared to what would have happened to me."

"Tough luck," repeated the other. "But they can't do anything to yer for this job we made such a rotten mess of. I won't forget how you tied up this shoulder of mine, nor how the kid did his best to give me a show to get away. I'll swear you wasn't mixed up in the job here."

The younger man smiled wearily. "It's not fear of their nailing this business onto me that gets me," he said; "it's the old case against me. I was supposed to be dead and buried, you know. Yes, it's tough luck. I was born under an unlucky star on the thirteenth day of the

month. In prison I was 'Number 1313,' and that was a double sign of bad luck."

"You made a great break, you and your two pals. When they nabbed the other pair and couldn't find you, it seemed that all the luck was yours. Course, arter I did my bit and was turned loose, I heard you had croaked. When I was sitting on that box just at day peep trying to stop the blood that was leaking out of me and you stepped out to give a hand at the job, you certain looked like a ghost. I couldn't believe you was old Thirteen-thirteen till you owned up to it. Then the youngster come on us, and we had to——"

"That's the thing I regret most. Look here, Riley, you owe me something, don't you?"

"Anything you say, old pal."

"I bound up your wound the best way I could. My brother caught me at it. Then we had to ring him into the business, knowing that the searchers were likely to trace you to that place. If they did so, it was a sure thing that I'd be nabbed, which must lead to the public knowledge that Clarence Sage, escaped convict, had not been

drowned in the Hudson. In hopes of avoiding this, my brother guided you into the woods and helped you as best as he could to get another start in your flight."

"The kid done his part all right, pal."

"Now I want you to do yours, Riley."

"Spiel it off. Lay it out. Put me on. What am I to do?"

"Not one word about my brother and the part he played must escape your lips. He did it for me, not for you, but you owe him this much: you must protect him."

"Bank on it, cull—bank on it. They'll never jimmy a word of it outer me."

"Thanks," said Clarence Sage, taking the single chair which the lockup contained and seating himself near the cot. "That relieves my mind in a measure. Fred's a fine boy, and it would be a shame to have suspicion fall on him. My misfortune has cast enough stigma on my unfortunate family."

"Say, 'bo, there's just one thing about you that I don't like. You don't have to put up this misfortune bluff to me. Course it's always hard

luck when we get laid by the heels on any little job, but seems to me you're throwing it out that you was on the level."

"I was," asserted Clarence Sage grimly, almost fiercely. "I was arrested, tried and convicted for a crime I never committed. If this were not true, I wouldn't think of saying so now. Somebody else looted the bank, and I believe I know the man. It was on his testimony principally that I was convicted. He saved himself, but the knowledge that he sent an innocent man to Sing Sing may possibly have caused him some uneasy and regretful moments."

"Well," said Riley slowly, as he narrowly eyed his fellow prisoner, "you spiels it like you was talking gospel. Mebbe it's true."

"It *is* true," asserted Clarence Sage. "Think what it meant, Riley, not only to me, but to my people. I have the finest mother a boy ever had. The thought of her shame and suffering has been gall and wormwood to me."

"My old mother," said Riley, with a touch of sentiment, "was dead and buried before I was pinched the first time, thank Heaven!"

Sage bowed his head and spoke in a low tone, his gaze fixed upon the floor.

"It was to get another look at my mother's face that I returned to Oakdale. I was here a week ago, and I went away without obtaining a glimpse of her. In all the years that I was supposed to be dead I have carried her image in my heart, and it was the knowledge of her faith in me—for she never believed me guilty—that kept me straight, I believe. I've knocked about in many places and associated with all sorts of men, some of them honest, but many more who were crooks. I've roughed it in Alaska, sailed before the mast, starved and nearly died from fever in the Philippines, tried my hand at coal mining in Australia; and through it all the knowledge of my mother's faith has kept me straight, even though I've had many a chance to turn a good thing by crookedness. At last, believing there was little danger, I came back and hunted for my people. I found them here, and here I have likewise found my undoing."

"Tough luck," said Riley again. "They'll send you back to the jug."

"No doubt of it. I'll have to serve out my term, with an additional period hitched on to it because of my break. There's water in my veins, Riley; the dread of what I'm up against takes the heart out of me. Perhaps you don't know what it is to be sent to prison with the knowledge that you're innocent and serving time for the crime of another man."

"It must be fierce," said Riley sympathetically. "And you say he put it on you at the trial? Pal, if I was in your boots, he'd get hisn some day. When I'd done my turn and been discharged, I'd look the gent up and hand him something he'd remember—if he was in shape to remember anything."

"That would be poor satisfaction to me. It wouldn't clear my name of the crime. It might mean that I'd be sent up again for another, still greater, crime. The only thing in this wide world that can ever give me the least satisfaction is proof of my innocence. I've dreamed of it—dreamed of it a million times. I've dreamed of standing before the world free and exonerated. Of going to my old mother and feeling her arms

about my neck and her tears upon my cheeks, and hearing her glad cry, 'I knew it, my boy—I knew it!' Nothing but that, Riley, can ever satisfy me, and if there's any justice under Heaven it will come some day."

"I hope so, pal—I hope so," said Riley, with genuine sympathy. "I'm just a plain crook, and nothing else; but for an honest man to be marked as a crook by the bulls and people in general—why, that's blazes, sure."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SHREDS OF HOPE.

During the time that Clarence Sage had been practically in hiding upon the premises of his parents his mother had been wholly unaware of his proximity. Resigned in her belief that her unfortunate son lay buried in another state, Mrs. Sage had bravely endeavored to make the best of the terrible affliction which had come upon her at a period of her life when all things had seemed the most promising of happiness and prosperity. Never for a moment, even after the jury had pronounced him guilty and he had been sentenced to prison, had Mrs. Sage entertained a doubt regarding the innocence of her older son. As far as possible the newspaper reports of the young man's escape from prison were kept from her; but in time, when, many weeks later, Andrew Sage had viewed the body of a man recovered from the Hudson and pronounced it that of Clar-

ence, it had been necessary to tell her the crushing and terrible truth.

For a time the poor woman was prostrated and under the constant care of a physician. During that period the body of the drowned man was buried and a tombstone bearing the name of Clarence Sage was placed over the grave.

With commendable knowledge of feminine nature, the physician, finally perceiving that drugs or medicines of any sort would never help Mrs. Sage, succeeded in rousing her by turning her mind from herself to her husband; by leading her gradually to believe that the shock of the tragedy had benumbed Andrew Sage and threatened to crush him entirely unless something could be done to encourage him to brace up; by convincing her that she alone could do this, and that it was her duty to make the effort.

The result was most surprising. The sick woman rose from her bed, and, seconded by the younger son, set about the task of cheering and encouraging the stricken father. She pleaded with him to turn his thoughts from their dead son and to remember that Heaven had graciously

spared them another son, to whom they owed a duty which must not be forgotten. She forced herself to smile, and in time the sunshine of that smile, even though tempered a bit with the faintest cloud of sorrow, which promised never wholly to leave her, drove most of the black shadows of bitter resentment from the heart of old Andrew Sage. In time they came to talk the matter over calmly, and decided to leave their home in New York, where, were they to remain, they must be continually reminded of that which they wished to forget, and move to some obscure town in another state.

And so it happened that, after many years of hardships and wandering and constant yearning for the sight of his mother's face, the young man who was supposed to be dead traced them to that little town. Through a window of the house he had tried to get a look at his mother, but had been sent scurrying away by Fred, who, discovering the prowler, came out and circled the buildings.

That very night Clarence tramped onward to another village, resolved to return no more to Oakdale. He had learned that his parents and

his brother were comfortably settled there and apparently peaceful and happy, and he told himself that the knowledge was sufficient.

But he had not seen his mother's face, and each hour and each day the yearning to do so grew stronger within him, until presently it made him falter, broke his resolution and caused him to turn back.

Fred, returning home from the disappointing duck hunt at Marsh Pond, was seen by Clarence, who suddenly decided to let his brother know that he still lived. The reader may imagine the state of mind into which this meeting between the brothers threw Fred Sage. It was this mental condition which caused his thoughts to wander in the football game that afternoon and made him responsible for much of the bad playing and many of the flukes which prevented the home team from piling up a bigger score in the earlier stages of the game, and thus encouraged the visitors to keep plugging with all the energy and aggressiveness they could work up, until eventually they swept Oakdale down in defeat.

For two nights Clarence Sage slept upon some

blankets in the stable granary. After seeing and talking with Clarence several times, Fred decided that their father should be taken into the great secret—should be told that the boy he thought dead was still living.

"If I know father," argued Fred, "and I think I do, it will do him a heap of good. On the other hand, I'm just as sure that it would be a big mistake to let mother know. She'd want you to stay near her, that she might be able to see you, and she would live in constant terror lest the truth become known and you were taken back to prison. She has struggled hard to forget you in a way, Clarence—that is, to put you out of her mind so that she might cease to brood over that dreadful thing."

Clarence agreed with Fred, and thus it came about that on Sunday old Andrew Sage came to know the amazing truth that his unfortunate son still lived. While Fred entertained his mother in the house the bewildered father talked with Clarence in the stable.

At first old Andrew had thought that his wife must be told, but it was not difficult to convince

him that this would be unwise. He spent as much time as possible talking with Clarence, who told him briefly the story of his experiences since escaping from prison, and together they laid plans for the future. Only once did Clarence declare to his father his innocence of the crime for which he had been convicted. Mr. Sage checked him promptly, stating positively that such a protestation was unnecessary, as he had never permitted himself for a single instant to entertain any doubts upon that point.

Clarence thought of going away Sunday night, but he had no money in his pocket, and, learning this, his father practically commanded him to wait until Monday, when he would draw from the bank and furnish the wanderer with funds, which might be taken as a loan and repaid when convenient. Thus it happened that Clarence lingered, finally to be captured as one of the bank robbers by Constable Hubbard.

As he had expected, when he hurried into the house to quiet her apprehensions, Fred found his mother much disturbed by the presence of the

armed men whom she had seen through the windows.

"What does it mean, my boy?" she asked, her face quite pale. "Why are they here?"

"They're hunting everywhere for the bank robbers, you know," was the answer. "There's no telling where the scoundrels may have taken refuge."

"But not here—they can't expect to find any of them here!"

"Perhaps they don't really expect to find them, but they can't afford to overlook the possibility. Why, what's happened out here?" As he uttered this exclamation he hurried to a window at the back of the house and peered through it, pressing his face against the glass.

The little subterfuge was sufficient. His mother likewise hastened to the window and looked forth, questioning him agitatedly.

"Two of the men out there—I saw them running, I thought," he answered. "They were running toward the corner. I didn't know but they had seen something. Look, mother, at that big tree at the edge of the orchard. Father had to

prop the limbs up when it was loaded with fruit. It must be pruned." In this manner he kept her at the window until he was quite certain that the men with the prisoner had vanished down the road toward town.

Afterward he waited with no small impatience for the return of his father from the village. He did not contemplate for a moment leaving his mother alone. Ordinarily he might have done so, but, now that she knew of the attempted bank robbery and had seen the armed man-hunters, she was pitifully pale and almost bordering upon complete collapse. Fred knew that her mind had been led to thoughts of Clarence and what he must have suffered in prison and as a fugitive with the armed guards hunting him across the frozen bosom of the Hudson.

Fred's own mind was in a scarcely less tumultous and painful condition, but he tried his best to lead his mother's thoughts into pleasanter channels. All the while, having placed himself where he could watch the road, he waited for the coming of his father.

In time Andrew Sage appeared, walking

briskly, although his shoulders were a trifle stooped. At once Fred made an excuse and hurried to meet his father.

As the boy drew near, he became assured by the old man's appearance that he did not know that Clarence had been taken.

"Father," said Fred hurriedly, "I want a word with you before you go into the house. Something has happened."

"What is it?" asked Andrew Sage, a sudden shadow of apprehension clouding his face. "Uncle Ed Tower just told me that another one of the robbers has been caught."

"Father," said Fred, standing with his back toward the house, "what I am going to tell you will be a shock, and it's possible that mother is watching us from the window. You must not let her see that you're affected."

The man's face grew suddenly ashen.

"Clarence?" he muttered hoarsely.

"Do brace up," urged Fred. "They came here to search for one of the robbers. They had been told that he was hiding in our stable."

"And they found Clarence?"

"Yes. He gave himself up when he realized that it was useless to try to hide."

"But—but he had—nothing to do with the attempted robbery. They had no right to touch him for that. Didn't he tell them?"

"What good would that have done, father? He was found concealed in our stable, and he's a stranger in this town. You can see that no explanation he could possibly make would keep them from locking him up."

"But they have no right to touch him!" cried Mr. Sage, with a sudden vehement gesture.

"Steady, father. Remember about mother. She does not know. I kept her diverted while they took him away. You must be strong. We must continue as long as possible to hide the truth from her."

"But it will all come out now," groaned the old man, his shoulders drooping more than ever. "It's my fault—my fault! Why didn't I let the boy go yesterday? I am to blame!"

"No one is to blame, father. It's just fate. It had to come."

"But—but if they find he's not one of the rob-

bers—if he can prove that he's not," said Andrew Sage eagerly, "perhaps they will let him go."

"That's my only hope, and it's a slim one, father. We mustn't base too much upon it." Even as he said this, Fred realized how futile that hope was. For had not Sleuth Piper, by prying and spying, learned the truth, which would mean full exposure for Clarence? Still, it was not best to let Andrew Sage know at present how desperate the situation was.

"I'm going into town and see what can be done," said Fred. "You're completely upset, father, but still you must keep it from mother. If they capture the other robbers there may yet be a chance—a very small chance—for Clarence."

"It's fate," mumbled Mr. Sage, repeating the words the boy had spoken a few moments before—"fate! It would have been better had he never come here; better had he left us in ignorance that he was alive."

He swayed, and Fred clutched his arm, again entreating him to brace up.

"I'm tired, tired!" sighed old Andrew Sage, his face drawn and haggard. "I must rest."

Alarmed, Fred said, "I'll help you to the house."

In a moment, however, Mr. Sage drew himself up and protested that he needed no assistance.

"Your mother, boy—your mother," he murmured. "She will see and be frightened. I'm all right now; I'm strong. You see what more you can learn, and if it's anything favorable let me know as soon as possible. Look! You can see that I'm all right now. Go!"

Bravely, sturdily he started onward toward the house, even turning to wave his hand and throw the boy a mock smile, which at that distance might deceive the eyes of the woman within the house.

After watching the old man for a few moments, Fred turned toward the village, breaking into a run ere he had passed beyond sight of his home.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A CONCESSION FROM SLEUTH.

In a way, business in Oakdale was suspended, or, perhaps it should be said that it had not really begun for the day. On the street corners groups of men and boys discussed the recent exciting events and speculated over the probability of quick capture of the robber or robbers who still remained at large; for it was believed that at least three men had been concerned in the effort to plunder the bank. Somehow, it had leaked out that a part of the bank funds were missing, and of course this created an additional volume of gossip and speculation.

Fred, searching for Sleuth Piper, was hailed by various schoolboy friends, but, further than to make inquiries regarding Sleuth, he had no time for them. At last he found the boy he sought, who was on his way to the office of the village lawyers.

Sleuth turned and waited as Fred called his name and came hurrying up.

"I want to see you, Piper," said Sage. "I want a little private talk with you."

"I'm pretty busy," returned Sleuth; "but I presume I can spare you a little of my valuable time. Of course I can imagine what you're after, but I'm afraid it won't be any use, old fellow. I'm sorry for you, but——"

"Oh, yes, you are—*not,*" flung back Fred scornfully. "After what you've done——"

"Now wait; stop right there," interrupted Sleuth. "I've simply done my duty, although in your position you may not regard it as such. If my brother was a bank robber and an escaped convict, perhaps I'd feel hard toward anyone who tried to send him back to prison, but at the same time I'm sure my sense of justice——"

"Bosh! That sort of tommyrot gives me a cramp. Besides, my brother is an innocent man."

Sleuth lifted his eyebrows and shrugged incredulously.

"He's innocent, I tell you!" panted Fred fiercely.

"It looks that way, don't it!" said the young amateur detective, unable in spite of his professed sympathy for Sage, to repress a slight sneer.

"No, it doesn't look that way," admitted the other boy. "I own up that it must seem that he's surely guilty. Here come some people, Piper. They'll stand around and listen. We can't talk here. Won't you come with me some place where we'll be by ourselves, with no rubbernecks around?"

Sleuth hesitated a moment. "I can see the lawyers later," he muttered presently. "As long as it's you, Fred, and you're so badly broken up, I'll do what you want, though again I must say I'm sure it's useless."

When Sile Crane and Chub Tuttle attempted to follow them as they turned down the street Fred whirled and almost snarled:

"What do you fellows want? Can't you let us have a little private talk?"

"Lordy!" gasped Tuttle. "Don't snap anybody's head off. Haven't you had breakfast? Here, take some peanuts."

Disdaining this placating offer, Fred strode away at Sleuth's side. Reaching the bridge, they paused.

"I hope you're not going to appeal to me from the standpoint of friendship," said Piper. "You must realize that it's too late now, old man. Your brother is captured, and I can do nothing. I expect to receive the reward offered for his apprehension."

"The offer was withdrawn long ago, when it was supposed that he had been drowned in the Hudson."

"Oh, I don't mean that; I mean the reward offered for the party known as James Wilson, or Gentleman Jim."

"Piper, you're on the wrong track. My brother is not Gentleman Jim."

Again Sleuth shrugged. Slipping his hand into his pocket, he drew forth the printed description of James Wilson which he had clipped from the newspaper.

"This fits him to a tee," he said. "He must be the man."

"I admit that, in a way, the description of Wil-

son seems to fit my brother, but still, I maintain that they are two different men, Piper. You'll find it out, too, if this Wilson was concerned in the attempt on the bank last night and he does not escape the men who are hunting for him. My brother had no hand in that business."

"How do you know that?"

"How do I know? Why, he—he came here alone; came to get a glimpse of the mother whose heart was so nearly broken over his terrible misfortune. Oh, Sleuth, you can't realize what you've done! You pried into our secret. There are few families so fortunate that they have no secret they wish to keep hidden from the general public."

"I won't argue about that," said Piper, returning the newspaper clipping to his pocket, "for it can have no bearing on the situation. You say your brother was not concerned in the attempt to rob the Oakdale bank. I ask, how do you know? He was here, wasn't he? He was hidden in your stable. Of course he told you that he came here to see your mother. That's a plausible story. But how do you know he didn't come here to

take a hand in that bank cracking? While you were asleep in your bed last night, he was helping his pals cut their way into the bank and blow open the vault."

"No—I tell you no!" contradicted Fred, his hands working convulsively, as if he longed to choke the other boy. "Clarence never did a dishonorable or criminal thing in his life. After his escape from prison he fled to the West, and, while this man called Gentleman Jim has been making himself notorious as a crook, Clarence has been in Alaska and Australia. He has but lately returned to this part of the country."

"How do you know?" persisted Sleuth, unshaken in his position. "Of course that's the story he told you. Naturally, he'd lie to you."

Fred's chest rose and fell; his teeth were set and his nostrils dilated; his appearance was so ominous that Piper shrank away.

"'Twon't do you any good to jump on me," spluttered Sleuth. "If your brother wasn't one of that gang, how did it happen that the wound of the other chap who was captured was bound up in your stable? How did it happen that you

led him into the woods, in order that he might have a chance to get away?"

"I'll tell you," answered Fred, after exhaling a long breath that seemed to relieve in a degree the tension of his nerves. "My brother knew that man in prison. The man's name is Riley. When Riley sought shelter in our stable my brother saw him sitting there on a box and trying weakly to staunch the flow of blood. Clarence came out and gave a hand to bind up Riley's wound. About that time some men searching for the robbers passed our house, and we learned what had happened. I went into the stable and came upon Clarence and Riley. Of course it was necessary for them to tell me how matters stood. In a moment I realized the danger to my brother —the terrible danger of having Riley traced there and captured on the premises. I knew what I was doing when I guided the man into the woods, but I did so for my brother's sake."

Sleuth shook his head. "Too bad—too bad you had to do that, for it makes you sort of an accomplice. However, Sage, even though you thought me your bitter enemy and I knew just

what you now own that you did, I haven't breathed a word that would bring suspicion of this matter upon you. I've pledged Hooker to keep still. He's your friend, and that fact ought to help keep his mouth buttoned up."

"As long as you've done this much, why won't you do something more? It's doubtful if the people here know anything of my brother's history, and so, if it's shown that he was not connected with last night's affair, he may be released. They are still searching for the robbers who have not yet been taken. Now if those men are captured and one of them proves to be Gentleman Jim, you'll see what a blunder you've made. It can do you no good to expose my brother and send him back to Sing Sing. Before telling what you know about him, won't you wait to see if one of these other burglars may not be Gentleman Jim? If you refuse to do that, I'll know that your behavior toward me was prompted by pure animosity, and nothing else."

"You're hanging on to a false hope, Sage," said Sleuth, after a moment or two of consideration; "but, seeing it's you, I'll agree to keep mum

for a while. That won't hurt me, for your brother is safe in custody and can't get away. When the robbers are captured and you're satisfied that your brother is the only one of the bunch who could possibly be Gentleman Jim, I shall tell the authorities everything. You can't ask me to do otherwise under those circumstances."

"You've agreed to do all I expected of you—and more," acknowledged Fred in relief. "I—I thank you, Piper."

"Don't," said Sleuth. "Some day you'll understand that there was not an atom of animosity or spite in my heart. Now, if you don't mind, I'll go see those lawyers. And don't worry, I won't blow until I've seen you again."

A short time later Fred Sage presented himself at the lockup, where he tried to get a word with Clarence, but admission was denied him. Ere returning home, more from habit than otherwise, he called for mail at the post-office and was given a letter addressed to his father. Not until he had nearly reached his home did he observe that the envelope bore the postmark of Rutledge,

New York, and that the names of "Jorlemon & Gates, Attorneys-at-Law," were printed upon it.

Jorlemon and Gates were the lawyers who had defended Clarence Sage at his trial.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE TRUTH AT LAST.

Old Andrew Sage uttered a choking cry and fell back on his chair, the letter he had been reading fluttering from his nerveless fingers and dropping upon his lap.

Startled, Mrs. Sage hastened toward her husband, and Fred sprang forward, crying:

"What is it—what is it, father? What's the matter? Are you ill?"

No wonder he asked the question, for Mr. Sage's face was white as chalk and he was gasping painfully, as if he found it difficult to breathe.

"Get some water quick, Fred," urged Mrs. Sage, bending over her husband.

In a moment Fred had brought a glass of water, and Andrew Sage took a swallow or two, which seemed to revive him in a measure.

"The letter," he whispered hoarsely, peering

from beneath his spectacles—"where's the letter?"

"Here it is, father."

"Read it, boy—read it!" almost shouted the old man. "Read it aloud, that your mother may hear. It doesn't seem possible! It's Heaven sent at this moment!"

Wonderingly Fred picked up the typewritten missive and began to read it aloud:

"DEAR MR. SAGE:

It is possible that you have not yet heard of the death of George Barrows, late cashier of the First National Bank of Rutledge. Mr. Barrows died yesterday, and, when he knew beyond doubt that there was no hope for him, he sent for me to come to his bedside and bring with me a stenographer. I complied, and in the privacy of the unfortunate man's death chamber I listened to a most astounding confession which absolutely clears the name of your unfortunate dead son from the stigma of the crime for which he was convicted and sent to Sing Sing."

At this point it was necessary for Fred to give his mother assistance and aid her into her own special rocking-chair. The moment she was

seated, however, she begged him to go on with the letter.

"We have now in our possession (Fred read on), a full and complete typewritten confession of the crime, in which Barrows took the entire guilt upon his own shoulders. Before the man passed away, we had this typewritten document read to him in his presence and sworn to before a notary. The document is secure in our private safe, and it can be made public at any time you choose. Although, most unfortunately, this confession comes too late to do your misjudged son any good, it, nevertheless, must give you no small degree of satisfaction and happiness. If you desire, Mr. Gates will come to you personally with the confession and place it in your possession, it seeming unwise to us to trust in the slightest degree to the uncertainty of the mails.

Permit us, my dear sir, to offer you and your good wife our most heartfelt congratulations. Sincerely yours,

HENRY D. JORLEMON."

The excitement and joy produced by the reading of this astounding letter was unbounded. Amid tears and laughter the members of the little family embraced one another again and again, and finally, when a little calmness had

come upon them, they knelt while Andrew Sage offered up a prayer of thanksgiving which came from the deepest chamber of his overflowing heart.

The moment the prayer was ended Fred leaped to his feet, kissed his mother, turned to his father and cried:

"You tell her, father. I'm going back into the village. I'm going to take this letter. You tell her the wonderful truth."

The door slammed behind him, and away he went as fast as his legs could carry him. And thus it happened that the parents of the young man who had been falsely convicted of a crime were alone together when old Andrew Sage broke the marvelous tidings that Clarence Sage lived and was even then in that town.

Racing into the village in search of Piper, Fred was just in time to see Sheriff Pickle and a large body of men conducting toward the lockup two tattered and battered men, the associates of the wounded burglar, who had been captured only after a hot pursuit and a desperate fight.

The morning train had brought into Oakdale a

slim, smooth-faced, quiet man in dark clothes, who had seemed greatly interested in the story of the attempted bank robbery. This man was also on hand when Pickle appeared with the prisoners, and with an air of authority he forced his way through the posse until he almost touched one of the captives, whom he surveyed with no small amount of satisfaction.

"Hello, Wilson," he said. "You seem to have made a bad mess of this job."

"Here! here!" cried the deputy sheriff, attempting to thrust the stranger back. "None of that! Keep away! What do you mean, men, by allowing anyone to approach the prisoners this fashion?"

"Keep your clothes on, my friend," advised the stranger, giving Pickle a look in which disdain and amusement seemed mingled. "You'll get your share of the reward for capturing Gentleman Jim, but I'll take him back to York State."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Burke Sheldon, and I'm a detective." Saying which, he flipped open his coat and displayed a badge that caused Mr. Pickle to gasp

and touch his hat with a sudden show of great respect. "I was pretty close on this man's heels. His pals are likewise wanted. See that you hold them tight and fast, officer, until I secure the needed requisition papers."

Now Sleuth Piper had not been far away when the new captives arrived, and, crowding close in the throng that surrounded the posse, he heard the words of Detective Sheldon.

"Great scissors!" he muttered, aghast. "Is *that* Gentleman Jim?"

Fred Sage had followed Sleuth into the thick of the crowd, and he proceeded to lay a hand on the shoulder of the bewildered boy.

"*That's* Gentleman Jim," he palpitated exultantly. "Now you see what a blunder you made. Luckily, you promised to keep still until these men were caught."

"It don't seem possible!" muttered Piper sorrowfully. "I don't see how I could have missed fire in my deduction."

"Come with me a minute," urged Fred. I've got something to show you. I want to prove to

you that my brother told the truth when he declared his innocence."

Seemingly dazed and crushed, Sleuth permitted Fred to drag him from the crowd, and when he had read the letter from Jorlemon and Gates he was a very sick-looking chap indeed. For some moments he stood with his hands sunk deep in his pockets, his head drooping and his eyes fixed upon the ground. Presently, kicking weakly at some pebbles, he began to speak.

"I had that five hundred dollars pretty well spent," he said. "I'd bought everything with it from a new pair of skates to an automobile. And now I don't get a red cent!"

Then, as Fred was about to say something bitter and cutting, Piper braced up suddenly.

"Look here, old man," he exclaimed, with an air of sincerity that surely seemed genuine, "for all of my confidence that I had that money as good as nailed, I've been feeling pretty rotten. I don't suppose you believe me, but it's a fact. I've been mighty sorry about the whole business since you talked to me a while ago at the bridge. Now, even though I've lost the five hundred, I'm feel-

ing better. Say, Fred, you must be ready to blow up with joy. Just think of it! Your brother is alive, and he's innocent. You have the proof. Old fellow, I congratulate you."

"Thanks," returned Fred, a bit coldly. "I'm glad you have the decency to say that much."

"There's only one hope left for me now," said Sleuth. "The bank is out twenty thousand dollars in securities, and I believe I can put my hand on the thief. Anyhow, that will be a feather in my cap."

At eleven o'clock that forenoon, while the officials of the bank were in consultation in the directors' room, the door-man appeared and stated that there was a boy outside who insisted that he could tell who had robbed the institution.

"It's one of the boys who helped catch the wounded burglar," he said. "His name is Piper."

"Admit him," directed Urian Eliot.

Sleuth entered, bearing himself well. His eyes roved swiftly over the assembled officials until they rested upon Lucius Timmick, who sat hud-

dled on a chair at one side of the great oak table.

"What is this you claim, my boy?" asked Mr. Eliot. "Do you pretend to say that you know who robbed the bank?"

"Yes, sir," answered Sleuth positively, "I'm dead certain I can point out the man. He's in this very room."

While the electrified assemblage gasped over this statement, there came a sudden disturbance outside the door, which was violently flung open to admit Captain Quinn, who was threatening with his cane the door-man as the latter tried to collar him.

"Keep away, you swab!" roared the old sailor. "I tell you I've got business in here. Put your hands on me and I'll mop the deck with you!"

"He—he would come in, gentlemen," said the door-man, seeking to excuse himself for the interruption.

"You bet I would!" rasped Quinn. "And if I'd had a marlin-spike instead of this cane, I'd busted your head when you tried to put your dirty hooks on me! I guess I've got something that belongs aboard this here craft. I caught

my monkey, Jocko, hiding it in my bunk. I reckon the little rat must have come in here through the busted winder and swiped the stuff, and I suppose in the excitement nobody saw him. Here it is."

He pulled a thick package from his pocket and flung it down upon the table. Timmick, leaping from his chair, seized the package and took one look at it. Then he uttered a joyful shout.

"The missing securities!" he cried. "Here they are! That lets me out."

It likewise let Sleuth Piper out. At any rate, in the midst of the confusion attendant upon the return of the securities Sleuth slipped through the open door and made all possible haste to leave the bank.

Some time later Rod Grant found Piper leaning on the railing of the bridge and gazing gloomily down at the icy waters of the river. Sleuth did not even look around when Rod slapped him on the shoulder, crying:

"What are you thinking about, you great detective—jumping into the drink? Going to commit suicide?"

"I will admit," answered Piper in a doleful voice, "that such black thoughts have percolated through that empty chamber where up to the present date I've supposed my brains were located."

"What's the matter?" persisted Grant. "Why, you're one of the heroes of the hour. You and Hooker caught one of the burglars——"

"After he had tumbled into a gully and bumped himself as helpless as a dead flounder," returned Sleuth, with unspeakable self-scorn. "A great piece of work, that! Hook may feel chesty over it, but not I. Leave me, Rodney—leave me to my sorrow. Let me suffer alone and in silence."

Thus the Great Oakdale Mystery was cleared up to the satisfaction of all, for in time even Sleuth Piper professed to be rejoiced, and his profession was accepted as genuine by Fred Sage, whose own great happiness would not permit him to hold hard feelings toward anyone.

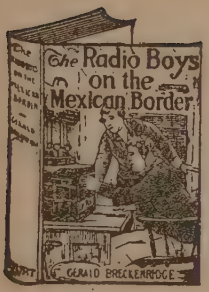
Clarence Sage, cleared of any suspicion of complicity in the attempted robbery of the Oak-

dale bank, soon went to Rutledge, where Jorlemon and Gates took up his case, and, with the aid of the dead cashier's confession, quickly obtained for Clarence the governor's pardon.

* * * * * * *

That the Sleuth's love of the mysterious was quieted only temporarily by this failure of his deductions is shown by his further adventures, related in the succeeding volume of this series. His plottings, however, prove merely incidental to the larger interests of the story, which deals with a new element introduced into Oakdale by another year's registration of students. The old and new standards of conduct in and out of school meet, battle, and cause sweeping changes in the lives of several of the boys. All this is told in "New Boys at Oakdale."

THE END.



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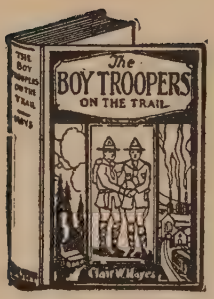

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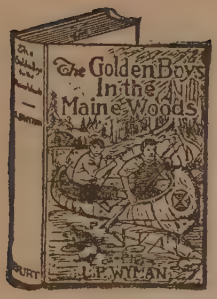

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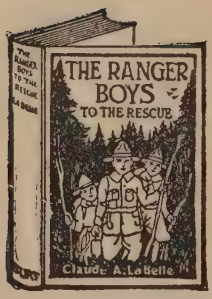

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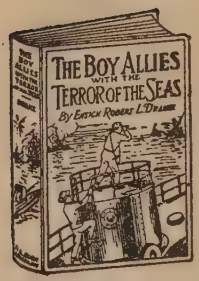

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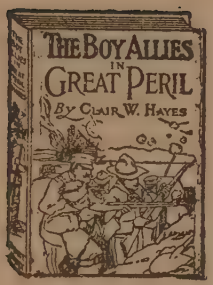

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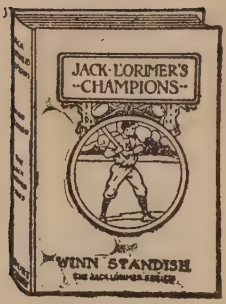

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